

The Master of Mirage

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The Master of Mirage

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Summary

Ash Ketchum thought that he experienced some strange things and faced almost every type of villain around, but this was something on a whole different level. One small thing can change everything, and sometimes the lines between what is real and what is just a mirage are impossible to see.

Sequel to The Mystery of Aura.

AU Novelization of The Mastermind of the Mirage Pokemon.

The Letters



One foot in front of the other; it wasn't that hard, was it? Just take steady steps and don't stop, and everything would be fine. At least, that's what Ash Ketchum kept telling himself as he walked towards certain doom.

Maybe he was being a little melodramatic, or a lot, if any of his friends could hear his internal thoughts. Despite how many times that he said goodbye to people, it still wasn't something that he was truly comfortable with, especially not when it came to human friends that he happened to be really close to.

"Are we there yet?" a young brunette with sapphire eyes whined. She trailed a little behind everyone else, her steps becoming even slower the more that they walked.

"Jeez May, don't be so lazy," her younger brother Max Maple quipped, his brown eyes looking back at her with both amusement and annoyance.

May Maple puffed up her cheeks and was about to yell back at him when the oldest of the group let out a laugh, distracting her.

"Yes, we're almost there," Brock Slate informed them, sounding much more giddy and excited than anyone else in their traveling party.

Ash looked over his shoulder at his friend with confusion, but beside him, a red-haired trainer let out an annoyed huff and said, "You are NOT coming to Cerulean so you can annoy and ogle my sisters, Brock."

"Ahh the Devine Daisy, Lovely Lily, and Vivacious Violet," Brock sighed dreamily, clapping his hands together as his face turned a pale shade of red. "It's been far too long."

"And he's gone," Misty Waterflower said with an annoyed sigh, the Azurill in her arms chirping happily. She hugged her baby Pokémon closer to her and mumbled under her breath, "Seriously, after all these years?"

Turning back so that he could watch where he was going, Ash let out a sigh and shifted a little bit. A small chirp of 'pika' from his shoulder drew his attention to his best friend and first Pokémon,

Pikachu. The yellow Pokemon's eyes flashed with worry, but Ash just smiled at him and closed his eyes.

Instead of darkness, faint lines of glowing blue appeared in his vision. It was a little annoying at times, like when he wanted to go to sleep but he could still see stuff. Nonliving things like rocks or even benches and beds weren't bad, but he could clearly see plant life, and he'd be almost blinded by a person or a Pokemon. Fortunately, Ash figured out that he could force the glow to go away or at least force his mind to ignore it.

He sidestepped a few rocks on the road without looking, shifting the egg in his arms so that he wouldn't drop it. Normally, a Pokemon egg would be kept in an incubator of sorts, but this one was different, it was a special egg entrusted to him and him alone. It was his responsibility to take care of the tiny Pokemon that would hatch from it. It wasn't the first hatchling that he ever dealt with; he had his own Phanpy that hatched, and he took care of a baby Larvitar for a while too. Plus Togepi always seemed to prefer him in the absence of Misty, so there was that. This egg was different though. This Pokemon came with a whole new responsibility that he honestly wasn't sure he was ready for.

He wouldn't be Ash Ketchum if that thought stopped him though. He was the type to keep pushing forward towards his dreams and goals, no matter what bumps in the road he might stumble across!

Though his cramping arms just might defeat him. How Misty was able to constantly carry Togepi around like this for years baffled him. She still did it with Azurill at times too, like she was at the moment. It was ridiculous. The egg was his responsibility, but he really wanted someone else to carry it around for him.

Almost unconsciously, Ash opened his eyes and glanced over at Misty. She was arguing with Brock, though that tended to happen when he got all gooey over some girl. It was actually kind of amazing, because she seemed to argue with Brock more frequently than him now, though that didn't mean they weren't snippy with each other. They wouldn't be Ash and Misty if they didn't argue somewhat.

A frown made its way to his face as they kept walking. He didn't want to reach Cerulean City, because that would mean that Misty would need to leave. He understood why she needed to stay and run the gym, he really did, but he didn't like it at all.

Misty stopped arguing with Brock and turned away from him, pouting a bit until she caught Ash's eye. Her pout turned into a genuine smile that made him smile too, and he was reminded that things would be okay, no matter what happened or how far apart they were because, beyond anything else, she would always be his friend. As long as she was chasing her dreams too, he would be happy for her.

"Look!" Max cried out excitedly, startling Ash. The young teenager followed his gaze, seeing a familiar, massive city looming in the distance. "That's it, right Misty? Cerulean City! That's your home, right?"

"Yeah," Misty said, sounding happy to be home, but there was also a tint of something else to her voice that no one else really caught on to. "That's home all right. Well, come on. We need to make it to the gym before it gets too late. It's been getting colder at night lately."

They all followed her, Max and May marveling at the sheer size of the city. Hoenn had big places too, but that didn't mean that the two youngest of the group still weren't amazed by all of this. Ash himself had been so excited for his gym badge, Misty's mermaid show, or other things in the past that he never really took in or explored the city all that much. It was something that he'd have to do

someday.

"This place is so awesome," May gushed, grabbing onto Misty's arm. "I can't believe they don't have a contest here!"

"You know, I'm a bit surprised by that too," the redhead agreed, shifting Azurill in her arms. "Most big cities do, but we don't."

"I can't wait to see the gym!" Max cheered. "Brock's was pretty cool when we went there! I know Dad's a Gym Leader, but I like seeing them all!"

Misty laughed happily at him, and then looked at Ash teasingly. "Sounds like someone else I know."

He stuck his tongue out at her. "My dad's not a Gym Leader." Well, he could be, Ash didn't know that. That was a pretty sore topic that he didn't like to talk about though. At the moment though, he was only joking.

"Smartass," Misty mumbled under her breath and playfully punched his arm, rolling her eyes when he rubbed it dramatically.

They walked until they reached a large building with a Dewgong on the top, causing the others to stare in awe. Misty just let out a sigh, hugging Azurill closer to her as she muttered, "Let's get this over with."

May and Max didn't understand why she sounded so down as they walked towards the gym, walking through the glass doors at the front into a massive lobby. Ash was a bit surprised, because there was actually a cafe in it now.

"We don't take care of that," Misty explained when she saw him staring. "But they figured with their shows and stuff, that they could make some sort of split profit or something off a snack stand." Under her breath she muttered, "The only smart thing I've ever heard them say." They, of course, being her elder sisters.

Ash snickered a little bit as they followed Misty back into the private halls where people weren't generally allowed to go. He'd been there many times himself, but even Ash, as unobservant as he could be with this type of thing, could see how everything they walked by was in so much better shape than when her sisters were alone running this place.

She really was needed here. It was a bit disheartening because he wanted her to keep traveling with them, but it was awesome to see her making her own mark on the world too.

Ash could hear her sisters before he saw them. All three were home, and they seemed to be excited about something. If the excited tittering wasn't enough to confirm the other Waterflower girls were there, the dopey look that came over Brock's face when he shot forward did.

Misty sighed with annoyance behind him and muttered something under her breath, he just laughed and said, "Better go stop him, right?"

Rolling her sea green eyes, Misty nodded her head and looked at May and Max. "Come on, let's go meet my sisters. You'll appreciate yours after this, Max."

"I doubt that. OW! MAY!" He rubbed his head where she smacked him as she walked by, but she just let out a small giggle and kept going.

Misty's sisters were in the living room that looked out through one-way glass over the main pool

where the battles were held. Ash was more drawn to the fact that he could see water Pokemon happily splashing around rather than Misty's notoriously beautiful sisters and jumped when all three cried out Misty's name at the same time.

"Misty! Like, you're back!" Violet say, relief in her voice. "Dewgong has, like, been ignoring me again. She totally only listens to Daisy now."

"Yeah, what's with that?" Lily agreed. "Anyway, lots of the Pokemon have been temperamental with us lately."

The pink and blue haired women continued to prattle on while Misty just looked more and more annoyed. Brock was drooling over the women, Max and May were staring at the scene in horrid-awe, and Ash had no idea what was going on anymore because Violet was going on about a famous boyfriend or something and that really didn't hold his interest. How they got on that topic, he didn't know, and he didn't care. He was too busy staring at the Pokemon in the gym.

"Ah-hem." The two instantly stopped as Daisy Waterflower, the oldest, walked towards them and was about to say something when Brock pounced.

"Dreamy Daisy! I have spent every night since our parting dreaming of your beautiful face." He knelt down on one knee, taking his hand into hers. "It would make my dreams come true to hear that you feel the same."

Daisy blinked her sea green eyes down at him for a moment before pulling her hand back and saying, "I'm sure most people feel that way, but, like, all of the Sensational Sisters are spoken for. Except for the runt. Sorry, um, what was your name again?"

Brock looked blue with horror (almost literally), forcing Ash to have flashbacks about how he used to act when Professor Ivy was mentioned.

Misty wasn't paying attention to that though. Instead she was glowering up at her sister, her cheeks tinted pink as she glanced at Ash out of the corner of her eye before glaring again. Daisy cocked an eyebrow, before a knowing grin appeared on her face.

"Ash! It's been a while!" Daisy said, and May suddenly giggled a bit behind him. Daisy kept her eyes, the same as Misty's, locked on him though.

"Yeah, since I spoke to you on the phone," Ash replied cheerfully while shifting Riolu's egg in his arms, not the least bit intimidated by the sly smirk on her face. More often than not, when he called the Cerulean Gym while travelling, it was Daisy he got on the phone first while Misty was off actually running the gym. He was familiar with her and definitely wasn't thrown by her looks or personality. The other two were a whole different story though. He just tended to stare at them blankly and wonder how people thought he was stupid when there were people like those girls in the world. "That was a good conversation, wasn't it?"

Daisy raised an eyebrow for a moment before she laughed and swiped his hat from his head, ruffling his messy black hair. "Here I thought you were, like, stupid. You're getting to be a perceptive little bugger, aren't you?" She set his hat back on his head sideways before turning to face her sister again, all but ignoring May and Max. "Misty, you like, got this letter here and we swear we weren't, like, going to open it but Professor Oak called and kept asking if Ash was here yet because apparently he, like, got one too just after you guys left."

That caught their attention. Misty took the letter her sister offered and stared at it for a moment, flipping it over so that she could see the back that was sealed with a strange, wax symbol. "Old

fashion, huh?"

"What does it say?" May asked, practically bouncing up to her side.

Misty peeled open the enveloped and started reading the letter out loud.

"Dear Misty Waterflower,

Over the past few years, my research has led to many different interesting inventions that are now in the testing phase. For this test, select Kanto trainers have been asked to participate in a special event. I have created a new battle system, and I would like to challenge you to a battle against it. Others have already participated, and the results have gone spectacularly with low-levelled trainers, but now I would like to test the more challenging aspects of this battle system. A powerful Gym Leader such as yourself is the perfect candidate for this.

Therefore, I invite you to my Pokemon laboratory in order to test this new system on the date set in the information packet that was included with this letter. You will be joined by a few others, but the groups are small for control purposes. I look forward to seeing the Tomboyish Mermaid challenge my system.

Sincerely,
Professor Young."

"Woah! You get to go test a new battle system? That's so cool!" Max gushed happily.

"Hey, wait a second, didn't Misty's sister say that Ash got one too?" May asked, her sapphire eyes looking from one to the other curiously.

"Yeah, like, your mother and Trace have been calling all day, waiting for you to get here," Daisy said, putting a finger to her cheek. "You can, like, use the phone over there." She pointed towards a video phone on the opposite side of the room.

Ash quickly muttered a thanks and hurried over to the phone. He wasn't going to lie; he was a bit excited. A new battle system sounded awesome, and if he got a letter, maybe it meant he could challenge it too. It'd be awesome if they could go the same day too.

Setting Riolu's egg on his lap, Ash decided to dial Professor Oak's lab instead of home, and grinned broadly when he saw the old man appear on the screen. "Hiya Professor!"

"Ash, my boy!" Professor Oak said cheerfully. "You finally made it, I see."

"I did," he nodded his head.

"Ash?" His mother appeared, staring at him over Professor Oak's shoulder. "Oh good, I was worried something happened to you. I suppose you're calling about the letter? I hope you don't mind I opened it. When Professor Oak got one with a similar seal, I was a bit worried."

"It's okay. Was it about that battle system?"

"Yes it was," Professor Oak answered him. "It appears that Professor Young has chosen to challenge you as well. He's invited you the same date as he did for me, so I was hoping you could get to Cerulean City before the night. It's set for tomorrow, so it would give you tonight to get rested up, and early tomorrow I could come and pick you up on my way by."

"That sounds great!" Ash said cheerfully, before shifting around and looking behind him. "When's

yours for, Mist? Tomorrow?"

"Yeah," she nodded her head, frowning a bit as she looked at the map that she was given. "I don't know how I'll get there on time."

"Professor Oak and I got invited for the same time," he informed her before looking at the screen again. "I don't suppose there's room for everyone, is there?"

"Why of course, all of your friends are welcome to come. I know Professor Young, and I'm sure it won't be a problem."

"But why Ash?" Max blurted out suddenly, causing everyone to look at him. His face went red, and he said, "Well, you know, Misty's a successful Gym Leader, and Professor Oak is the most famous Pokemon professor in the world, but why Ash?"

"Well," Delia answered this time, "he mentions wanting to challenge the Orange League Champion."

"Orange League..." Max trailed off with confusion, and Ash's cheeks went a bit red.

He had been so proud of his win at the Orange League and was technically the Champion of that sub-region (it wasn't given all the same prestige, power or anything else like the main regions were), due to his age he couldn't accept the title of active Champion, so people still had to fight Drake. If they beat Drake, Ash was given the option to battle them too, but so far, no one had beat the young man since he had.

So many people didn't really count the Orange League as any sort of victory though, and he was mocked for his enthusiasm over it by many people, so he tended not to bring it up anymore. He was a bit surprised that he never thought to mention it to his new friends.

"That makes sense," Brock spoke up for the first time. "He probably picked Professor Oak, and then found some names associated with him."

"Oh." Ash felt a little stupid for not thinking of that. He looked behind him again and said, "Whatdya say, Mist? Wanna go?"

"I do want to," she admitted, "but I've been gone from the gym for a while now..."

"Just go," Daisy waved her hands. "Imagine if this thing works? We can, like, say you were there to test it!"

"My sister, the sudden marketing genius," Misty deadpanned before looking at Ash again. "Alright, I'm in."

"Great!" Practically bouncing on the seat, Ash looked back at his mother and Professor Oak and gave them the thumbs up, which Pikachu copied on his shoulder. "We're in."

"Excellent. I'll swing by at about 8:00 tomorrow morning. Get a good night's sleep!"

"And remember to change your—"

"Ah! Bye mom! Professor Oak!" Ash cried out quickly, hanging up before his mother could get out the rest of her sentence. May and Max both laughed and Brock snickered behind him, because everyone knew how that sentence ended.

"Well then," Daisy clapped her hands together. "You guys, like, get cooking supper. We have important appointments to keep. Toodles!" The three sisters were quick to leave, and Ash had to wonder how long they had been planning their escape from the gym for.

"More like they have to go and fix their hair," Misty muttered while glaring at their retreating figures.

"I can't believe they're all taken," Brock sulked and then yelped as Max jumped onto his shoulders and grabbed his ears to pull him out of his 'oh-no-girls-don't-like-me' mood.

"Come on, you can cook to get over them," the young boy insisted.

"I do like cooking," Brock admitted before looking over at Misty. "You don't mind if I use your kitchen, do you?"

"Go for it," Misty waved her hand in the direction of the kitchen, and Brock (as well as Max) went that way. She turned and looked at Ash and May. "How about you two come with me? I'd like to check on the Pokemon before it gets too late."

"Alright!" Both of them nodded their heads eagerly, following the redhead out of the room.

...

May was in awe of the gym. Sure, she had gone into many of them with Ash before, and her father was a Gym Leader, so it wasn't like she had never been in a gym before, but there was something about the absolutely massive pools with the water Pokemon swimming around that just took her breath away. The whole place was beautiful. There were comfortable seats, the ceiling could apparently retract so it was a sun roof, and apparently the pool could rise up so it was above ground. That alone blew her mind.

The Cerulean City Gym was beautiful. Even Ash seemed in awe, and he'd been there before.

"It's really different," he explained when she pointed that out. "It was always cool, but it looks way more badass now."

"Thanks," Misty beamed, quite pleased that they liked all the hard work she put into making the gym better. The renovations were her idea, and she was the one to get sponsors to pay for a part of it while going through mountains of paperwork with the league. Knowing that even someone as dense as Ash Ketchum could appreciate it let her know her work was worthwhile.

"Hey!" Ash's eyes went wide as he suddenly took off towards the edge of the pool, kneeling down next to it. "Hi there, Horsea!"

"Sea! Horsea horsea!" the small Pokemon trilled, instantly recognizing him. It leapt out of the water and into his arms, splashing him and getting his shirt wet, but Ash just laughed. He'd left the egg safely in Misty's room wrapped in a blanket, so there were no worries of it accidentally rolling into the pool or something like that. Pikachu bounded over as a few of the other Pokemon that Misty left there popped up to say hello.

May laughed at the sight, and Misty just shook her head, but was smiling all the same. The brunette looked around at the older girl, her smile changing into a light, almost curious one as she tilted her head slightly, sapphire eyes inquisitive.

"What?" Misty asked her. It was funny how May had many mannerisms the same as Ash, including that curious look when they silently wanted to know something.

"This gym is beautiful," she said, clapping her hands together happily. "You must be so proud. I know my dad is of his. You'll be the best Gym Leader in Kanto one day, I just know it!"

Misty smiled at the praise, but her smile faded, brow furrowing slightly. May blinked with surprise, not quite sure what she said wrong. "What?"

"I love this gym so much," Misty admitted, "and I am so proud of it and so honoured to be a Gym Leader but..."

Pursing her lips a bit, the brunette stared at her thoughtfully before asking, "What would you like to do when you're older?" The concept of 'when you're older' was a bit different to the kids who left home when they were ten. They tended to grow faster, tending to be the younger individuals in their select career paths. She clapped her hands together enthusiastically. "I want to be the top coordinator around, Brock wants to be a breeder, and Ash wants to be a Pokemon master, but what about you?"

Misty was surprised that a girl who was pretty oblivious in general hit the nail on the head. She looked over at Ash, smiling as he laughed and interacted with her Pokemon, having brought out his own Corphish, who was now playing in the water with the others. "My dream? The day I met Mr. Pokemon Master there, I told him that I wanted to be the world's best Water Pokemon Master. It was funny because our dreams were very similar; mine was just more specialized. Maybe I could be on the Elite Four or at least be one of the traveling Masters." Her voice was wistful, like she was talking about seeing a beautiful, mythical Pokemon.

"Oh! That's a good dream!" As she spoke, it occurred to the young girl just why Misty frowned when she mentioned her being the best Gym Leader in Kanto. "Oh, but isn't it hard to do that while staying at a gym all the time? I know my dad thought about trying to become a Normal Master, since there haven't been many, but he had me and Max to worry about so he changed his mind. He said he'd have to travel too much."

"Well, to be a master of a specific type, you have to have a lot of knowledge about the Pokemon, and you have to interact with a lot of them. Being the Gym Leader of Cerulean City for however many years gives me a bonus, because it shows that I am serious about Water Pokemon and I'm experienced with them too. Eventually, if I can train my sisters to not ruin this place, I'll travel around to different places, enter water-based tournaments and competitions, and catch all of them." She spoke in the same wistful tone, but there was also a bit of skepticism in her voice, like she didn't believe that she could do it. "For now though, this is the best thing I can do for myself." Misty suddenly blinked, like she was snapping herself out of a spell, and looked over at May. "Don't get me wrong, I love being a Gym Leader here. Sure, I wish I had the option to travel more; I wish my sisters could be more responsible, but I love this gym. I'm just so limited to the Pokemon I can catch and study here. Online information helps, but nothing's better than the real thing."

May was silent, looking around at the Pokemon. Her eyes lingered on Ash as he splashed with the Pokemon a bit before snapping her fingers and pointing at him. "Have you ever thought of asking Ash to find you some water Pokemon while he's traveling? Or maybe letting his stay with you? You'd have more to see and interact with, and they'd have more room than in the river and pond at Professor Oak's." She seemed quite pleased with herself for coming up with this plan.

"I..." Misty trailed off, glancing at Ash. "I never thought about that, honestly. Ash has always been so focused on his journey, I never—"

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean he wouldn't be willing to help. He helps me with training all the time, and when he talks about you, Brock, Tracey, and even someone named Gary, he always sounds so proud of you all. He may have his dream, but he's really supportive of everyone else's too." May

giggled a little and added, "Besides, if he wants to be THE Pokemon Master, shouldn't he know a lot about all types? Including water? I know he doesn't have many of his own, so it would help him too." She could tell Misty was really thinking about it now and added one last thing. "You saw earlier how excited he was for you to get that letter. Ash is cocky about himself, but he thinks we're all pretty great too. Especially you."

Misty's cheeks turned pink, but she could feel her pride swelling a bit. May was right. Her dream didn't have to be at a roadblock just because she was here. Being a Master didn't mean she couldn't ask for help on her way to the top. Ash knew that best of all. Both of them were being recognized for their battling, and that's why they were invited to test out the new battle simulator. That had to mean something.

Suddenly, because of this perky, young girl pointing out obvious things didn't seem quite so helpless.

Sky

Meeting A Mirage

They were all up before the Dodrio could caw to the rising sun; not that there were any Dodrio doing that in Cerulean City, but that was something Ash experienced many times back in Pallet Town. He wasn't generally an early riser by nature; he really liked his sleep, not to be confused with him being lazy, which he definitely wasn't. Years of being on the road made him used to it.

Those days when the pure excitement filled him always had Ash up bright and early in the morning, most of the time before anyone else. The only exception was the morning he started his journey, which was incredibly odd in retrospect. Sometimes, Ash would joke that Professor Oak purposely told him the wrong time, just so he would show up late and get Pikachu instead of one of the official starters. There was absolutely no reason Professor Oak would do that though, because there was no way he'd have any foresight that Ash could tame the, at the time, very nasty Pikachu, now was there?

He tried to keep quiet that morning, leaving Pikachu curled up with Riolu's egg. Ash even managed to slip into the shower and then into his clothes again without waking anyone else, practically bouncing his way to the kitchen. Needless to say, he was incredibly surprised to see that Misty was already awake.

Deep brown met sea green as they stared at each other awkwardly, trying to decipher each other's motives. Then almost identical smiles spread across their faces.

"Are you excited?" Misty asked, eyes lighting up. "I could barely sleep."

"Barely sleep? I'm pretty sure I developed a nervous twitch!"

"That's it? I'm still jittery!"

"Doesn't matter, I know I'm more excited than you."

"Are not!"

"Are too!"

"Are not!"

"Are too!"

Misty burst into laughter, unable to handle their childish arguing at the moment. She genuinely was just as excited as he was to be chosen for this new battle system.

"You wanna help me make breakfast?"

Ash gave her a disturbed look. "You're cooking?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'd like to be alive to go to Doctor Young's lab, thanks."

Misty shot him a dry look. "I can cook better than you can."

"Says who? I'm around good cooks all the time. For all you know I've picked a few things up."

"Well, I will never trust your cooking, so I'm going to have to learn for when it's just you and me." Almost immediately, her cheeks went pink and she looked at the ground. Ash rubbed the back of his head and chuckled a little bit. There was a moment of awkward silence as the implication of her words settled onto both of them (looking back at the moment, Misty would admit that she was surprised that he got it at all).

Luckily, Ash managed to clear the air. "I doubt it. You burn water, and you're supposed to be a water expert!"

"You jerk!"

Normalcy returned, their playful arguing only broken up when Brock interrupted them to actually make breakfast, not trusting either of them with cooking utensils.

Once everyone was up and moving, Ash decided to wait by the doors of the gym, eagerly watching for the Professor and impatiently waiting for his friends to get ready. He was sure that Misty was just as eager as he was to get on the road again, to see exactly what was going on. He knew that while it could be quite a walk to Cerulean, driving a car would take much less time, especially if Professor Oak left when he said he was going to. He should be arriving any minute.

"Ash looks like a Poochyena," Max noted, eyeing the way Ash would perk up and look around at the sound of any car coming towards the gym. May giggled a bit at her brother, nodding her head in agreement.

"Hey Champ," Brock said to him, coming to where he was waiting and pressing a breakfast sandwich into his hands. "Eat up. It's a big day."

"Thanks, Brocko!" he replied cheerfully, eagerly scarfing down the food and taking the offered orange juice to go with it. Brock just chuckled at his younger friend.

"Chew, Ash," May teased him. "Don't just bite and swallow it."

"You're one to talk," he mumbled with a mouthful of food.

"Oh, ew, Ash," Misty groaned as she came towards the door, a pink bag slung over one shoulder instead of her Spheal backpack and Azurill in her arms. "Don't talk with your mouth full."

He stuck his tongue out at her, but he stopped arguing as the sound of a car once again got his attention, and he turned around to peer out the door. His eyes lit up and he didn't even complain when Pikachu, who had been napping happily on top of his head, ate the rest of his sandwich. Ash just jumped and cheered, "Professor Oak's here!"

Sure enough, a large SUV stopped in front of the gym with the Professor sitting behind the driver's side grinning at them. Ash rushed out the door and came to a stop beside the vehicle "Hi Professor! Thanks for coming to get us! Do you have my letter?" Behind him, he could hear Misty groan and Brock chuckle.

Professor Oak let out a hearty laugh at his enthusiasm and said, "That I do, my boy. We need to get a move-on though if we want to get there on time! Is everyone ready?"

"You bet!" Ash exclaimed and looked back at his four companions, who all nodded their heads in agreement.

"Excellent. Everyone climb in, and we'll get going." The Professor seemed just as excited as he did, an almost familiar, childish gleam behind his dark blue eyes, though Ash didn't quite know why it

seemed familiar at all. It definitely wasn't because he used to see a similar look on Gary's face when they were younger; Gary had his mother's brown eyes. Ash just shrugged it off. There were more important things to focus on right now.

"Let's go, guys!" he cheered to his friends before clamouring for the back seat. Whenever they got into a car, Ash rarely ever fought for the front seat, instead letting Brock have that. He was older, so it just seemed fair.

Soon everyone else had piled in, May and Max in the middle row while Ash and Misty sat behind them in the back with Pikachu and Azurill sharing the middle seat between them, Ash holding Riolu's egg on his lap. It wasn't cramped at all compared to when they were in the jeep that belonged to Kidd Summers where all four of them had been shoved into the back with no seatbelts. Here they were all securely strapped in and ready to go.

"And here we go!" Professor Oak said cheerfully as he turned the car around and started driving.

Misty twisted around slightly and stared out the back window as they drove away. Ash glanced back to see what she was doing, but there was nothing interesting behind them. Misty caught his curious look, and she said, "Just enjoying this. I'm going to be staying at the gym for a while after this, so it's like watching one last adventure start."

"Yeah," he said slowly, sort of understanding. He almost always looked back at Pallet Town before leaving again. He sent her a bright smile and said, "But it's a good thing, right? You staying at the gym. It's helping you fulfill your dream for now!" He laughed a bit. "And that's what counts. Still, don't think about what's gonna happen later; just have fun for now!"

Misty seemed a bit surprised as that, but her expression shifted into a smile. "Yeah, you're right. Surprisingly insightful for someone like you. Maybe you're not as dumb as I thought."

Ash shot her a playful glare, hearing the light, teasing tone to her voice and knowing that she didn't mean what she said. There was no point arguing right now though, not when they were all too excited. He turned to look out the window again, a grin appearing on his face. A safe adventure for fun was exactly what they needed.

...

As they drove towards Doctor Young's lab, they ended up leaving the smooth, paved roads that connected the cities of Kanto together and onto the dirt trails that trainers were much more familiar with. These highways were something that Ash, or most trainers for that matter, got to experience on a regular basis. The Pokemon rarely ever frequented the busy roads, and the trainers went where the Pokemon went. It was for the best anyway. Kids walking on open, busy highway was just an accident waiting to happen.

May and Max were completely enthralled with the scenery as Brock helped Professor Oak navigate his way to the secluded laboratory. In the back, Ash was silently reading over the letter that he received for the fifth time, feeling excited and proud that someone actually thought he was worth the invitation. It was Ash's goal to be the best, but he knew it was going to take a lot of work, years of it, so a little praise made his ego skyrocket a little more than it should have.

"Keep staring at that piece of paper and it's going to catch fire," Misty commented, shifting Riolu's egg in her lap, having taken it from him earlier.

"But Misty! This is really exciting!" he said. "Right, Pikachu?"

"Pi pika!" The electric-type gave him a thumbs up.

She rolled her eyes at both of them, causing Ash to reach out and poke her shoulder. "You can't tell me you're not excited. I know you are!"

"Zu zuril!" Azurill agreed.

Misty tried to keep a stern expression on her face that melted away at the pure excitement showing on his and she let out a laugh. "Fine. I guess I am too." She playfully poked Azurill, causing her to laugh.

"Oh wow!" May exclaimed, interrupting their conversation. They all looked forwards as the road with trees opened to a massive lake and what almost looked like some sort of castle rising in front of them. "It's beautiful! I've never seen a laboratory castle before!"

"Me neither, but it's sure awesome," Ash agreed as he leaned forward a bit to look at it, brown eyes going wide with eagerness. "Wow, your colleague is impressive, Professor."

"Yes, he certainly is."

Ash blinked a bit and looked at Professor Oak. Maybe it was just because he had grown up with the Professor, but he could hear a little bit of strain in the man's voice, and there was something about the very light aura around him that seemed off, though Ash couldn't pick up on what. Then again, he also thought that Mimey's seemed off when he saw a feather duster, so who knew. Ash shook his head and decided that he was overthinking things. It tended to happen a lot lately, and bad things always followed when he was overthinking things.

Professor Oak pulled his SUV to the side of the shore, leaving it in the shade so that the warm sun wouldn't leave it feeling like an overheated sauna when they came back. Everyone piled out of the vehicle, taking in their new surroundings in awe.

"What do you think, Pikachu?" Ash asked the Pokemon, reaching up and scratching behind his ear.

"Chaa," he cooed happily, nuzzling his cheek into Ash's raven hair. "Pi pikachu pika."

"I think it looks cool too," he answered, walking around to the other side of the SUV where Misty got out. He held out his arms and said, "I'll take that back now. Thanks. I don't know how you constantly carry them around like that."

She rolled her sea green eyes in an exaggerated way, passing him back Riolu's egg. Instead of trying to answer, she looked around at Professor Oak and asked a question that had been bothering her since they pulled up. "Why do you think there are no other cars here, Professor?"

"I was wondering the same thing," the old man said, walking towards the large, opened gateway. He was trying to hide the bit of suspicion in his voice, but he was unable to really do so. No one else seemed to notice aside from Misty. Instead, they were all happily making their way inside and staring in awe at the building. It was definitely no Cameron Castle, but it was still amazing to see.

"Hey," Ash spoke up as he saw small, glass domes on the ground, "what do you think those are?"

"Some sort of outdoor lighting system maybe," Brock suggested, barely taking any time to observe them. It seemed like a fairly standard thing to him.

Ash didn't respond to that, his eyes focused on the domes. There was something really odd about them, an energy that didn't sit quite right with him, but he couldn't really explain it. Maybe now

that he unlocked his aura, energy sources were just more noticeable to him, who knew? There was no one he knew that he could go to for answers.

"Professor, do you know anything at all about this battle system?" Max asked, his brown eyes wide with curiosity.

"No. The only thing I heard was that his years of research had come to an end," the man said, shaking his head and fixing his long, white lab coat.

Almost like he was summoned, a man's voice said, "My dear guests, I've been waiting for you! Welcome to my laboratory."

Ash looked over and saw a man much younger than Professor Oak approach them. He had blue hair, glasses, and wore a lab coat just like the Professor did. He seemed youthful and friendly enough, but Ash tensed up slightly.

"Pi pika Pikapi?" Pikachu asked from his shoulder.

"It's nothing," Ash said, his eyes never leaving Doctor Young as Professor Oak turned to speak to him. Something felt off, but he didn't know what.

"It's been a long time," Oak said to the man, a friendly smile on his face despite his earlier reservations. Taking their cue from him, the young trainers decide to introduce themselves as well.

"I'm Misty," the redhead spoke up when Ash didn't, which was a bit of a surprise. "These are my friends, May and Max Maple, and Brock Slate." She then looked at the raven-haired boy with a raised eyebrow.

"Oh, I'm Ash," he said, shaking off his awkward feelings and smiling like he normally would. "It's nice to meet you!"

"The pleasure is all mine. I'm Doctor Young," the man replied, his periwinkle eyes shining with excitement. "And Oak, it has been far too long, hasn't it? I'd like to thank you all for coming to help test my battle system. I've had other trainers here to test it out, but I knew that it was time to present it to you, Oak. And these two, fine, young trainers will be the perfect ones to demonstrate it to you before you take it on yourself."

Right, the battle system. Ash felt his excitement overpower any wariness that he had as he bounced forward, Pikachu on his shoulder and Riolu's egg in his arms. "I really want to see this battle system!"

The man laughed at his enthusiasm and said, "Well, at is so happens, you're standing inside of it."

Their faces all twisted into ones of confusion as they looked around. Sure, the courtyard they were in was big enough to hold Pokemon battles in, but with polished, stone floors, it didn't seem like the best place to do it.

"Shouldn't there have been some sort of massive machine?" Max asked with bewilderment

Doctor Young smiled. "You would think, but having a sleek, elegant design was important for this. Let me demonstrate." He reached into his pocket and took out a black remote, pressing a button that made it unfold to reveal even more controls.

Ash watched in awe as the domes on the ground opened up to reveal more gem-like things instead. He watched as they lit up, and means of light attached each gem together. He was both amazed and

a little alarmed as the light zigzagged under their feet, forming hexagons across the ground.

"What's going on?" May wondered.

"This is a mirage field," Doctor Young said, pressing a few more buttons on his remote. "As long as it's active, then the Pokemon can move freely just like real Pokemon."

"Real...Pokemon?" Brock repeated, a bit of skepticism to his voice.

"For a battle system to work, the trainers have to be fighting something," the doctor said with a laugh. "Observe." The gems lit up with a brilliant orange light, and that was when the uncomfortable feeling hit Ash again

It was hard to describe because he was completely enthralled by what he was seeing, but there was something about the orange light that he didn't like.

Ash looked around quickly, watching in horror as the crystals started cracking and falling, expelling thick, black smoke, like the orange colour was actually fire inside of them. This felt wrong. He could feel his own aura building in him, able to recognize the feeling against this negative energy now. Aura was the essence of life, like Lucario explained, so this had to be the opposite. Suddenly, he understood. Mew was fine when the tree was fine, but when it was like this...

"This is bad," Ash muttered, looking down as the Pokemon in his arms.

"What?" Misty asked him.

"Mew's not sick," Ash said. "He's dying."

Ash shook his head, catching Misty's worried look out of the corner of his eye. He just smiled at her and turned back to where three figures were materializing before him. That must have been why he didn't like it, it reminded him too much of the orange light that signaled death and destruction back at the Tree of Beginning. Satisfied with that mental revelation, he eased his grip on Riolu's egg, not even realizing how tightly he was holding it in the first place, focusing his excitement on the prospect of being able to battle soon.

The light vanished, and all of them gaped in awe at the creatures that appeared before them. "Oh wow," Misty said, a bit of an airy tone to her voice, and Ash knew why.

"Kabutops," Brock said eagerly. "Omastar and Armaldo too!" It made sense for Brock to be excited, all three were extinct rock-type Pokemon (two with a secondary water-type, which was why Misty was so happy). Pewter City even had a massive fossil museum that Brock's family was very much involved with now that they were all back on their feet, both parents home.

"Those are all extinct Pokemon," Professor Oak noted, staring at each of them curiously. "They look very lifelike. This could be an impressive tool for studying Pokemon as well as battling."

"They're mirage Pokemon," Professor Young informed them, sounding pleased at Professor Oak's enthusiasm. "Observe." He pressed a few buttons and a blue, holographic cube rose out of his remote. They watched as a figure of Kabutops appeared in it. "My system can create any Pokemon, complete with voice, intelligence, and bodies based on their data. They only exist in this type of field, a mirage field, hence why I've called them mirage Pokemon."

Ash blinked at them, his brow furrowing. "They seem real to me." Aside from a faint glow around them, they certainly looked real. He would know; he'd come face to face with all of these Pokemon

before. There was something off about them though, something he couldn't really distinguish.

"Are we allowed to get a closer look?" May asked curiously.

"Of course," Professor Young waved his hand at them. "Go ahead."

They all approached them curiously, commenting about just how real they looked and how it was barely possible to tell that they just materialized out of nowhere.

Max reached forward, expecting his arm to go through the shell of the Omastar, but instead, it came into contact with a rough, rocky shell. "They are real," he gasped in awe.

"How is that possible?" Misty wondered, suddenly eyeing the scythes that the Kabutops had, knowing just how dangerous and deadly those could be.

"This system allows me to create any Pokemon at all, as long as we have the data," Professor Young informed them happily. "From the Caterpie and Weedle—" (Ash poked Misty, sending her an amused look, and she smacked his arm while glaring back) "—that you see every day to the extinct Pokemon that we only know from fossils and the rare fossil regeneration. With the right data, the possibilities are endless! The field of Pokeology is on the threshold of a leap of quantum understanding! But I digress." Professor Oak straightened up, his impressed look shifting to a much more serious one.

The three Pokemon were surrounded by the orange light again, combining into one as an Aggron appeared instead. It roared aggressively, and all of the trainers took a step back away from it, May grabbing Max's shoulders and pulling him closer to her despite his protests.

"Ash, Misty," Professor Young said suddenly, and the two in question turned to face him. "Would you like to challenge my mirage Pokemon?" He sounded polite and friendly, like they were doing him a huge favour but wouldn't be disappointed if they said no.

The word challenge echoed in Ash's mind, and any of the odd feelings he had were instantly replaced as he bounced with enthusiasm. "You bet!" His mind was already running through the Pokemon he had with him. Though he only had five usable Pokemon with him right now, he switched them around late last night, wanting to test a couple that he hadn't seen in a while.

"Pika pika!" Pikachu agreed enthusiastically, pumping his tiny fist in the air.

"Hold on a second!" Misty said, putting her hand on her hip and throwing her arm out to physically cut Ash off. He gave her a surprised look, and she sent him a playful wink. "Where are your manners? I know your mother taught you some. Ladies first."

"Ladies first, huh?" he raised an eyebrow, a grin appearing on his face. Misty sent him an unimpressed look, hearing the silent 'I don't see any ladies' that she just knew was going through his head.

"Don't be a jerk." She swatted his arm.

May giggled at their interaction and said, "I really wanna see Misty battle too!"

"May!"

"What? I've seen you battle loads of times! Seeing Misty in action would be cool! Plus Squirtle could learn a thing or two!" the brunette insisted.

"Alright," Doctor Young spoke up before Ash could splutter out some sort of a retort. "Let's move to the battle arena!"

"You mean we're not battling here?"

"Pika?" Trainer and Pokemon both tilted their heads and watched with confusion.

"No, no," he laughed. "Come along, I'll show you where the battles take place."

Sky

A Questioning Battle

If the entrance wasn't impressive enough, the courtyard in the middle of the palace-inspired lab was absolutely amazing. All of the younger trainers stood in awe, and it even looked like Professor Oak was impressed. Of course, since they were testing a battle system, it should have been obvious that there would have been an arena of some sort, but none of them really thought about that.

"Wow, Professor Young must have a lot of investors," Brock said as he took in everything, his head turning to look at something new with every step he took.

"Hmm..." Professor Oak acknowledged that he spoke, but didn't say anything about it, his lips remaining firm in a straight line. The younger trainers were all too excited to notice the tension coming from the Professor, even Ash.

"Your mirage system works here too?" Max asked in awe.

"Well, of course," the blue-haired man nodded his head, seemingly pleased by the young boy's enthusiasm. "Without an arena, a battle system would be quite useless, wouldn't it?"

"Look at it though!" May said happily, running forward and looking at the field that was laid out in the middle, made specifically for Pokemon battles.

"Welcome," Doctor Young stopped in the middle of the field, facing them all, spreading out his arms, "to my Mirage Pokemon Battle Arena. A prototype, of course; a real arena would be much bigger by far. This type of system would require official league sizes." He clapped his hands together. "Everyone who is observing, please stay to the sides." He turned to Misty, smiling warmly at her. "Are you ready?"

"You bet I am!" Misty said with a grin before turning to May. "Will you hold Azurill for me?"

"Sure!" May took the small water-type into her arms, and then released her own young Squirtle. "We're going to watch a future Water Pokemon Master in action, so pay attention but stay right here."

"Squirt squirtle!"

"Hey," Ash grabbed Misty's hand before she went over to the side of the field opposite Doctor Young. "Show him why you're one of the best."

A pink tint appeared on her cheeks, and she sent him a grateful smile that turned into one of pure confidence. "You bet I will!" Misty squeezed his hand back before letting go and taking her spot in the challenger's box, not seeing the suspicious look that Brock gave Ash.

'See these white lines here?' Professor Oak asked a group of young children. 'This is the trainer's box. Leagues have actual boxes and podiums most of the time, but the trainer is not allowed to step outside of these white lines or they're disqualified from that round. If their Pokemon has fainted and that round is over, they may go and retrieve their Pokemon by hand if they wish but then return back into the box.' A much younger Ash Ketchum soaked it all in, eager to be on an actual Pokemon battling field.

"I hope you don't mind; I'll be using Aggron," Professor Young said to Misty as he programmed the field again, the Pokemon appearing in front of them. The large, steel-type Pokemon stomped its way into the middle of the field, standing just in front of the white line that made up a circle in the

middle.

'When the Pokemon battle, they need to stay inside of these white lines,' Professor Oak pointed to the outside of the field. 'It's the trainer's responsibility to keep them in there. If they roll outside of them, they have a few second to get back in before the battle is considered over.'

'This is all boring stuff people know,' young Gary Oak muttered. 'Except for maybe Ashy-boy.'

'Shh, Gare-bear, some of us are trying to listen,' Leaf Green argued back. He glared at her, but Ash ignored both of his friends.

'Professor!' a little girl with long, dark blonde hair and bright blue eyes called out, raising her hand.

'Why yes, Serena?'

'Why is there a circle in the middle?'

'Ah, now that's important. At the start of the match, the Pokemon must be facing each other, not off to different sides. So to make sure that they do this, they have to stand as close to the white line as they can. However, they cannot go over the line that splits the field before the match begins. It's also where the referee is supposed to stand. Understand?'

'This is complicated.' The little girl sighed.

Ash disagreed. This was very important and very exciting, and he couldn't wait to learn more.

Ash was brought back to the present as Professor Oak walked to the center line, realizing that the man must have been asked to referee.

"The Pokemon battle between Misty, the leader of the Cerulean Gym, and Doctor Young will now begin! Each will have the use of one Pokemon, and the winner will be decided when either side cannot battle anymore!" Professor Oak announced, his voice echoing across the field.

'Gramps, we already know the rules; why are those people announcing them again?' Gary asked, his voice bored and tired.

'It's so both trainers and the audience are all on the same page. Sometimes information can be misinterpreted beforehand, so this lets everyone know exactly what's going on,' the old man said, ruffling the young boy's hair. Ash would never admit it, but he felt a stab of jealousy while watching those small gestures.

"Alright then!" Misty said, a determined look crossing her features. "Staryu, I choose you!"

"Staryu?" May repeated, sounding a bit surprised. "Why not Gyarados? And I thought she had a Starmie." She looked over at Ash curiously.

"She does, but her Staryu is one of her oldest and most experienced Pokemon," he explained. "They evolve by water stones, so just because it's in this form doesn't mean it's not really strong." He chuckled a little, remembering how he once thought the same thing. It was all so confusing, learning exactly what evolved with stones, what needed certain conditions, and so much more. It was one of the reasons he always scanned Pokemon that he already knew with his pokedex. He found that even Johto could have different information from Kanto, and Hoenn had even more. He sometimes even scanned Pokemon that he already owned at one point of time, like a Charmander or a Pidgey, just so his pokedex would update the information, since the only ones that registered automatically were the ones that he currently had and not their previous forms.

He was actually getting quite good at remembering things about Pokemon, though there was so much information that sometimes he had to double check.

"Well," she let that thought rest on her tongue for a moment, "I guess that's like Pikachu too, right? He's not evolved, but he's a lot stronger than most people think."

"You got it," he sent the young coordinator an encouraging smile. "If my Pokemon don't want to evolve, I don't make them, even if they'd be stronger. If they're happy as they are, that's what matters to me." He turned to the battle again. "That's the same reason I'd let them leave too." His dark brown eyes slid over to look at Misty, not the Pokemon. "It's worth it if they're happy and it's what they really want to do."

"Hiya!" Saryu appeared in the middle of the field, opposite Aggron. Though Aggron looked like the obvious winner, being so much bigger and stronger looking than Saryu, the water-type it also had the type advantage, since Aggron was part rock-type.

"As you said before, Misty, ladies first," Doctor Young insisted, even though he had the disadvantage. "You can make the first attack."

"Why thank you," Misty said, though she was well aware that she needed to be wary, because this was no doubt a very strong Pokemon. Still, it wasn't exactly real though, so that made it unpredictable. "It'll be my pleasure."

There was a pause and then, "Begin!"

"Saryu, Bubblebeam! Go!" She pointed her arm forward, and bubbles erupted from the gemstone on Saryu's chest, speeding at Aggron and slamming into him, sending dirt and dust flying into the air. "Good job Saryu! A direct hit!" Misty didn't want to seem too arrogant, but her Pokemon were strong and she was rightfully proud of them.

"She must have done some damage to it!" Max exclaimed, practically hopping up and down. "That attack was super effective!"

"Yeah, and Misty's a really good trainer too," Ash agreed, nodding his head as he watched the battle with as much enthusiasm as if he was actually battling himself.

"Pi pikachu pikachupi!" Pikachu cheered and pumped his fists from Ash's shoulder, causing his trainer to laugh.

The dust cleared, and their excited demeanour shifted, turning into a stunned one.

"Aggron!" the steel-type roared loudly as it stepped forward.

"That didn't do a thing to it!" May gasped, her sapphire eyes going wide with confusion.

"How is that possible?" Ash asked, looking over at Brock.

Though he had many Pokemon now, Brock was once the Pewter City Gym Leader, specializing in rock-types, so they would always hold a place in him above the others, whether he admitted it or not. The young man frowned, looking over the Aggron. "There's not a mark on it. That's not right. Even a very powerful Aggron should have felt that attack a bit. Misty's Saryu isn't weak by any means." There was a tone of suspicion in his voice that only Ash caught, the younger two were both watching the continuing battle again.

"Aggron! Sandstorm! Go!" Doctor Young's words, while similar to Misty's, sounding almost more

robotic, and once again, Ash got that vibe, that feeling that something was off there.

Maybe it wasn't just the colour of that orange light triggering a memory.

Aggron slammed its feet into the arena, throwing dirt up into the air, causing it to swirl around and block their view, a swirling stream of sand heading for Saryu.

"Dodge it!" Misty called to her Pokemon as she shielded her eyes.

The attack was fast, but Saryu was faster. It jumped into the air, completely clearing the attack, only for the sandstorm to twist without warning, rushing up and slamming into Saryu's gem.

"What the hell?" In sync, the words escaped both Ash and Misty without meaning to, sea-green and dark brown eyes both locked on the water-type as it was pummeled and then slammed into the ground.

"Saryu!" Misty called out, worry tinting her voice as the Pokemon twitched a bit but didn't move.

"Did you see that?!" Max yelled, throwing his arms into the air.

"That Aggron sure is strong!" May agreed, looking down at her brother as he turned to face her.

"Not just strong! Amazingly strong! One of the toughest I've ever heard of!" He waved his arms in the air at her.

Ash looked over at Brock, who was watching the battle with a stern expression. He'd be the first to commend a powerful Pokemon, but he was frowning. A quick glance at Professor Oak told Ash that he was doing the same. Something wasn't quite right here.

"Mirage Pokemon are nothing to mess with," Ash said, his brown eyes narrowing. He just assumed that this would be more fun than anything else, but now he was glad he brought along a couple stronger Pokemon, though now he wished that he thought to bring his strongest (who, surprisingly, wasn't Pikachu) along.

"Pi." Pikachu perked up on his shoulder slightly.

"What's up?" He didn't take his eyes away from the battle as Saryu managed to get up again.

"Pikachu!" At the Pokemon's slightly alarmed tone, Ash looked around, but there was nothing in the direction Pikachu was looking. He figured that he saw a Pokemon flying by, perhaps a Spearow or Fearow (neither one of them were fond of those pokemon).

"Saryu!" Misty cried out to her Pokemon, a bit of frustration and anger tinting her voice. "We can't lose! Use water gun now!"

"Hi-ya!" The Pokemon jumped into the air, a powerful stream of water erupting from one of its points. Ash could almost see it on Misty's face; she really wished that she brought Starmie now, one of the two Pokemon she had that was stronger than Saryu.

"Aggron!" Doctor Young countered, "Use Thunder Wave!" For a Pokemon that wasn't particularly known for its speed, Aggron moved out of the way of the water gun, using the stream of water to its advantage, sending waves of electricity back up to the Pokemon.

"Saryu!" Misty cried out as the Pokemon twitched and shuddered in the air. Ash had once asked her (in regards to Starmie), how she could tell if they were in pain or not since they didn't have a

face, but she just knew. It was like how he knew what Pikachu was saying without question.

"Aggron, let's finish this!" Professor Young pointed at Saryu. "Use Bullet Seed!"

"Ah! A grass-type attack!" Max cried out.

"Squi, squirtle!" May's young Squirtle cried out, hiding behind her legs. May felt awful for it; she promised that the Pokemon could watch a good fight, but Saryu was getting thoroughly thrashed.

Saryu didn't stand a chance. It slammed into the ground from the force of the Bullet Seed and fell still, the gemstone on its chest flashing.

"Saryu," Misty muttered and ran forward to her Pokemon, kneeling down and cradling its injured form.

"Saryu is unable to battle!" Professor Oak called out. "Aggron is the winner! The victory goes to Doctor Young!"

Misty took a deep breath as she held her Pokemon close for a moment before grabbing the pokeball and putting it back inside. She pushed herself to her feet, sea-green eyes staring at her opponent warily. "How did Aggron do that?"

"It shouldn't have been able to learn Bullet Seed or Thunder Wave," Max muttered with a frown as they approached the orange-haired girl. He liked Misty a lot and didn't like the fact that she lost.

"It shouldn't have?" Ash was once again surprised that Max knew so much about Pokemon off of the top of his head. He took out his pokedex and found Aggron's entry after a moment, scrolling through all the possible moves as Misty came back over to them. He glanced at her for a moment as she looked over his shoulder, obviously just as curious as he was. "Actually, Thunder Wave is on here, but that's not the point."

"Aggron can learn it, but it's rare and takes a lot of very specialized training," Brock confirmed with a frown as he stared at the undamaged Pokemon.

"You're all forgetting," Professor Young said as he walked up beside Aggron. "This is a Mirage Pokemon, not a normal one, and by manipulating the data, I can easily change the attacks it has."

"That..." Misty trailed off as she took Azurill back into her arms. She was going to complain that it wasn't fair, but she didn't want to sound like a sore loser.

Ash's eyes narrowed as he stared at the Aggron. "So your opponent never knows what attack his coming." Though admittedly not the brightest person in the world, Ash was becoming adept with strategy, and he knew that something like this, having an unlimited option of move sets, was definitely something to be wary of. Still, he wanted to see this for himself. As much as a person could get into a battle, experiencing one was something entirely different. "Alright! It's my turn now!"

"Glad to see you're still on board," Doctor Young smiled, as if he expected Ash to chicken out. "I hope you don't mind, but I'd like to use Aggron again."

"Aggron, huh?" Ash stared at him for a moment before nodding his head. "Okay." He turned to face his older friend. "Brock, do you mind...?" He held the egg out.

"Sure." He reached out to take it, but Ash jerked it away from him. "What?"

"Give it back this time." He then handed his friend Riolu's egg.

Brock was confused for a moment before letting out a chuckle, shaking his head as Ash walked towards the challenger's box.

"What was that about?" May wondered, looking mystified.

"Oh, you remember Togepi, right?" She nodded her head, and Misty let out a sad sigh as Brock continued. "Well, Ash was the one who actually found Togepi's egg. That was when Charizard evolved to fight an Aerodactyl that wanted to eat Ash – not that Charizard cared, he just wanted to beat it – anyway, Ash found the egg, but I took it from him and never gave it back."

"Technically, he won Togepi too," Misty said, a smug smirk appearing on her lips as she hugged Azurill close. "But Togepi saw me first and thought I was his mother. He knew the better trainer!"

The younger two seemed honestly interested in the story while Brock just rolled his eyes at her and turned his attention towards the battle field, noticing Ash taking out a pokeball. "Huh, he's not going to use Pikachu."

"He's not?" That distracted everyone else from their conversation, bringing it back to the current time and the battle at hand.

"Smart of him," Max commented. "Pikachu wouldn't be very good against a steel-rock combination."

"Pi pikapi?" Pikachu asked as he saw Ash take out one of his pokeballs.

"Oh, I know you're the best I've got right now, but I think some of our old friends need time to come out too, right?" He tossed the pokeball high up into the air. "Heracross, I choose you!" The large beetle appeared on the field, looking ready and willing to fight.

"Heracross?" May repeated.

Brock chuckled. "That's smart. They're fairly evenly matched in typing. Rock's strong against bug, but fighting is strong against steel. Heracross can pack a punch too."

"The same rules as the first battle apply to this one," Oak called out, and both Ash and Young nodded their heads. "Let the battle begin!"

"Heracross, get into the air!" Ash called out to his

"Let's show them what you can do, Aggron!" Doctor Young called out, and the steel-type started charging at the incoming Heracross.

Then, without warning, it let out a pained sound and came to a complete halt. Heracross stopped, staring with confusion as it started to blink in and out of existence like a television station that was beginning to go snowy.

"Huh?" Ash blinked with surprise. "What's wrong with Aggron?" He had to remind himself that Aggron wasn't real, that it was a Mirage Pokemon, because it sounded like it was in so much pain.

But it could still touch and be touched by things. It was still really there. Did that mean the pain was real too? Ash bit his lip. He didn't like that at all. "Heracross, get away from it!" It was precautionary, but he didn't want anything to happen to his Pokemon.

"Doctor Young, what's going on?" Professor Oak called out.

"I haven't the faintest idea." He was trying to use all the controls on his remote. "I just lost control." The remote started sparking in his hand before it exploded, tossing him to the ground and making him hold his hand in pain.

Aggron roared in agony as it vanished. Max let out a whimper because of the sound, turning and burying his face into May's shirt. Squirtle hid behind her legs, Azurill shuddered in Misty's arms, and Pikachu's ears went flat against his head. "Pi."

"Return, Heracross!" Ash put his pokeball back on his belt and rushed forward, staring at where the Pokemon was in shock. He knew it was a Mirage Pokemon, but seeing it just vanish and in such obvious pain was nerve-racking.

"Are you alright?" Professor Oak asked as he rushed to Doctor Young's side.

"Yes, yes, I think so," the younger man said as he pushed himself up but let out an agonized sound as he held his burned, bleeding hand.

"He needs to get to a doctor," Brock said as he rushed over with May, Max, and Misty.

"No, I—" Whatever Doctor Young was going to say was cut off as the mirage system started activating, forming the extinct, fossil Pokemon.

Ash took an instinctive step back because this time there were a couple Aerodactyl in the air too. Ash would claim that he wasn't actually scared of any Pokemon like Misty was with her fear of bugs, but there were two Pokemon that always made him flinch or cringe either when he saw them, or heard them swooping down at him. One happened to be an Aerodactyl, since any time he ran into them, bad things usually followed. The other one was much more common: Spearow. It wasn't even Fearow; he didn't mind them, but a Spearow diving at him, especially more than once, was something else altogether.

He'd always put on a brave face for other people though, and now was one of those times.

"Those are the same Pokemon from earlier, right?" May asked, a bit of fear creeping into her voice. The ones from earlier had been calm, not moving very much when they approached.

"Those Aerodactyl weren't there earlier," Brock handing Ash back the Riolu egg. Ash opened his backpack, tucking it in while surrounding it with soft clothes and blankets, zippering the bag up. He didn't want it in his arms if they had to run. Misty seemed to be thinking the same thing too as she put Azurill back in her pokeball. "Something doesn't seem right either."

Brock wasn't wrong. Just the stances these Pokemon were in showed that they were much more aggressive.

"What's going on?" Misty wondered, her voice shaking a bit as she tugged at Ash's sleeve, though she didn't expect him to have an answer.

"This isn't possible!" Doctor Young cried out, his periwinkle eyes wide with alarm. "My remote was just destroyed! They shouldn't be here!"

That was when a deep, menacing laugh echoed through the arena. Pikachu let out a high-pitched whine as his tiny paws dug into Ash's shoulder painfully. The five of them moved closer together, looking around for the source of the voice.

"Dear Doctor Young." A shadow stretched over the ground, and the five trainers and two adults looked up onto the balcony of one of the tall towers.

There, standing in one of the tall towers was a figure with a mask and costume completely shrouding his identity. One thing they all knew for sure though was that this man was up to no good.

"Your mirage system has fallen into new ownership."

Sky

Shatter and Fall

On closer examination, Ash realized that thinking this mysterious person just had a mask on was wrong. He did have a mask made out of metal, though he was covered by a thick cloak, and he had on a huge hat that reminded the boy a bit of the one that Sir Aaron wore. That last thought made him a little bit bitter. He knew it was just his mind connecting coincidences, but he still didn't like it.

His anger bubbled up, and he took a few steps forward. Always the impulsive one, he yelled, "Who are you?" It came out much more aggressive than he meant it to, but hey, whatever worked. Especially since he could already feel the adrenaline starting to kick in, the pounding of his heart echoing in his ears.

"The name is Mirage Master," the figure said simply enough.

"Mirage Master?" He heard Misty mumble from behind him in disbelief. "Seriously?"

"What are you doing here?" Professor Oak called as he walked up beside Ash, looking down at the boy before he shifted in front of him, blocking him just slightly.

"What in the name of science do you want with my system?" Doctor Young demanded, and Ash had to shoot him a bit of a confused look. He thought science was amazing, but that really didn't seem like the appropriate response to the situation. He could think of a few choice words that would have fit the moment much better.

"What do you think?" Mirage Master asked aggressively. He gave no other warnings, thrusting his hand up into the air and yelling, "Get them!"

Okay, good on him for not standing around and chatting like so many other bad guys did, but it was still bad for them. The Mirage Pokemon charged at them, ferocious cries echoing throughout the laboratory.

Ash's first, gut instinct was to fight back. He wasn't one to run away from this type of situation, but a jerk of his arm drew his attention to Professor Oak, who was quick to start running, prompting him to do the same by pushing him in front of him. "Run! There's no way we can fight off that many of them!"

No one had to be told twice. They all started running, but as Ash looked over his shoulder, he noticed the Aerodactyl sweeping down towards the two older men. Knowing that they weren't as fast, he stopped running, twisted around and yelled, "Pikachu! Thundershock!"

Pikachu didn't hesitate, jumping off of his shoulder with a great, "Pikachuuuuu!" Electricity soared through the air, and though the Mirage Pokemon were faster and able to dodge it, it still threw them off their trajectory.

Professor Oak was able to escape their clutches, but one grabbed onto Doctor Young, pulling him into the air with an alarmed yell.

"Help me!" The man called out as Aerodactyl flew away with him, his screams echoing through the air. None of them had the chance to run to help, as the other Pokemon were still rushing after them.

"Keep going!" Oak urged them, turning to run. "We don't have any other choice!"

Ash didn't want to leave anyone behind, he really didn't, but everyone else was already running, and he could feel someone tugging at his arm, so he ran with them. He didn't want to be responsible for someone else getting attacked by these Mirage Pokemon.

"This way!" Brock yelled, running down the stairs two and three at a time with everyone else following his lead. Panic was starting to infect them all one by one, urging them to run faster than before.

"We need to get out of the gate!" Professor Oak told them, keeping up with them surprisingly well for someone his age. "The Mirage Pokemon can only move around inside of here!"

Something shot through Ash's mind, like some form of awareness that he couldn't really understand. He twisted around in time to see a black orb rushing towards the youngest in their group.

"Max!" It was completely instinctive, but Ash jerked around and threw himself in front of the younger boy, feeling a rush of energy that was slowly becoming familiar. Instead of slamming into them, the Shadow Ball slammed into an invisible barrier, the pale blue colour becoming visible for only a second at the impact as the shockwave sending both him and Max to the ground.

"Are you two okay?" Misty's voice reached them, alarmed.

"Yeah, we're okay," Ash replied as he helped Max off of the ground, shaking his hand a bit where it felt like it had pins and needles.

Professor Oak had a perplexed look on his face before his eyes narrowed and he said, "Hurry! Keep running and don't stop for anything else! Go!"

They listened to him, running towards the gate. Professor Oak stood, ready to face the Pokemon charging at him, but they completely bypassed him, running after the trainers instead. He wasn't going to let anything happen to those children, running after them.

"They're going to catch us!" Max sobbed out, for once relieved that May refused to let go of his arm so that he wouldn't fall behind again. "I just know they are!"

"We're almost there!" Ash kept his eyes focused on the gate, though for once, he didn't push the 'feeling' of his friends away, suddenly loving the fact that he knew they were close without having to actually look back at them. A feeling of relief rushed through him as he passed through the gate, his friends not far behind him.

They all stumbled to the ground, breathing heavily. Though all of them were in shape, the panic that settled in and the sheer speed-boosting adrenaline that they used to outrun Pokemon was starting to wear off already.

Ash twisted around and saw Professor Oak running after them, but he was still inside of the laboratory. He felt his breath hitch when he saw an Aerodactyl swoop down towards the man. Misty let out a gasp beside him and yelled, "Behind you!"

"Professor Oak!"

The man was lifted into the air by the Mirage Pokemon, and though he struggled, it flew back the same way the other one had taken Doctor Young.

Without thinking, Ash jumped to his feet and rushed back towards the gates, fully intending on running after Professor Oak. As he drew closer though, that uncomfortable orange light appeared,

forming the Mirage Pokemon again. An arm grabbed him, and he skidded to a stop. Looking over his shoulder briefly told him that Misty was the one restraining him, though he shouldn't have been surprised. She was always able to catch him, even when he was running his fastest.

"Enough!" The dark voice boomed over the intercom system. "The time for child's play is over!" Though they couldn't see the Mirage Master anymore, the silence that followed, and the stillness of the vicious Pokemon guarding the gate let them know that he was gone.

"We need to get inside," Ash said, a bit of desperation in his voice.

"We need a plan," Misty argued, not letting go of him. "You know I'm right."

"Professor Oak—"

"Will be able to take care of himself. Come on." She showed just how strong she was by managing to grab onto him, dragging him back away from the stone gates with relative ease. To be fair, Ash didn't struggle quite as much as he would normally, because he knew she was right. He just didn't like it at all.

...

"Everyone's okay, right?" Brock asked. They were hiding in the trees, down by the water that surrounded the laboratory, able to still see it, but out of sight.

"Yeah," May said as she looked at the scrape on Max's knee. "We were lucky."

"It wasn't luck." Max twisted around and stared at Ash. "You used Aura, right? It seemed to have no problem standing up against the mirage attacks. Well, we did go flying, but it was better than getting hit by a Shadow Ball. I mean, Aura Sphere is a fighting attack, and it has no effect on ghost-types but still, your Aura could block it. Then again that is different entirely."

Ash stared blankly at Max as he started to ramble on about something that he knew the young boy actually had no clue about. As he kept saying the word 'aura', Ash tensed up because something was wrong that had nothing to do with the lab or the Mirage Master or anything else.

That was when the panic erupted in him. He swung his backpack off, his hands shaking as he tugged at the zipper, actually tearing it in the process and tossing everything out of it as he reached for Riolu's egg.

When he saved Max, the impact sent them both to the ground and he landed with the full weight of his body on his back, on his backpack, on Riolu's egg.

Though still in tact, the shell was a splintered mess of cracks. His horror and panic overwhelmed him as he slumped down, holding onto the egg desperately as he tried to fight off the hot tears that threatened to consume him. He was supposed to protect this egg. It was, in part, Lucario's second chance, or at least a part of his spirit, the rest having gone on with Sir Aaron. The Riolu was purely a gift, a responsibility that Mew told him to cherish and love, but it hadn't even hatched and he had already failed.

"Ash," Misty knelt beside him, putting a comforting arm over his shoulders. "You need to calm down."

Max let out a strangled sound at Ash's other side, but he didn't pay attention to him, not even as May gasped and held her brother close to her, whispering the words, "It's not your fault."

"Ash," Brock knelt in front of him. "It might be okay. Pokemon are incredibly durable, and it was ready to hatch soon, so Riolu wouldn't be as fragile. We need to get it to a Pokemon Center to check that though." He looked up towards the looming laboratory in the distance. "I think we need to get the authorities here too."

Riolu could be okay. That was really the only thing that registered to Ash as Pikachu sniffed the egg and looked up at him. There was hope in the yellow Pokemon's eyes, and Ash latched onto that hope. He didn't need a Pokemon Center just to know.

Ash closed his eyes as he concentrated, trying to look beyond the bright lights that surrounded his friends, the nearby Pokemon, the trees and even the grass. Instead, he focused on the egg in his arms and was met with a burning, bright aura that was shifting, reaching out to him. Ash had no idea what he was doing, but it was like he could feel himself reaching out to that light, blending it with his own. He could feel something there, two things actually, and he realized a second later that he could feel Pikachu a little more than before, probably because he had been directly between the egg and Ash, and Ash's aura ended up touching his lighter one too. It was a strange sensation, but he realized something quickly.

Riolu was alive.

His brown eyes opened again as light overtook the egg, a common occurrence when Pokemon eggs hatched. Without looking at him, Ash knew that Pikachu was curious too as the egg just seemed to vanish, and there was a very tiny Riolu in his arms instead. It wasn't awake, but its small chest was moving up and down smoothly, and Ash could feel its aura reaching out to his.

"He's okay." Misty's voice honestly startled Ash, even though she had yet to release him from her comforting grip. He looked up at her briefly before looking back down. Riolu would be okay, but he was so small. Smaller than the stats Professor Oak looked up for them, but he felt okay. Just exhausted. Some people might have found it anticlimactic, but that was completely ridiculous.

"Yeah." He hugged the small, sleeping Pokemon to his chest, watching with a smile as it let out a small sound and snuggled into his shirt, even if it had yet to wake. His smile slowly left his face as anger started to build up in him. "That psycho with his Mirage Pokemon could have killed him!"

His panic over the baby Riolu was fading, and now he wanted to charge into the stupid laboratory and punch that Mirage Master in the face, metal mask be damned. Pikachu seemed to be on the same wavelength, a small charge of electricity leaving his cheeks. No one hurt baby Pokemon around Pikachu and went un-shocked.

"Someone needs to get Officer Jenny," Max piped up, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "She really needs to know about this."

"Max is right," May agreed, watching as Misty pushed herself up from where she had been kneeling beside Ash. She realized that she spaced out for a split second and shook her head before continuing with her point. "Whatever's happening here is probably bigger than just us."

"Most of the trouble we get in was bigger than just us," Ash deadpanned as he followed Misty's example, shifting Riolu in his arms, and Pikachu adjusted himself on his trainer's shoulder.

She opened her mouth to argue, but closed it, unable to argue with him because it was true. Her sapphire-blue eyes studied her raven-haired friend before she sighed and shrugged.

"May is right though," Brock said, thumping his fist on his chest. "Leave it to me guys! At times like this, I'm the best one for the job."

There was a pause and then Misty let out a groan. "Please, you just want to go and see Jenny."

"Hey!" Brock crossed his arms in front of him, sounding honestly offended. "Do you think I'd think of something like that during a time of crisis? That I'd actually call Jenny on the phone and invite her out on a romantic, candlelight dinner date, and then have some alone time afterwards?" The more he spoke, the redder his face got, and Ash could swear that there were hearts in his eyes.

Brock suddenly seemed to tune back in, looking from May's amused face, to Max's confused one, to Misty's disbelieving one, and finally to Ash's (surprisingly) annoyed one. He cleared his throat then said, "I can take Riolu to the Pokemon Center too."

Misty mumbled something about Nurse Joy (which was probably true). Ash shook his head. Though he knew he should probably take the prematurely hatched Pokemon to the nurse, he didn't want it far from him. There was an instinct, something rushing through him that he was going to trust this time (since shrugging it off inside had been an awful decision in retrospect). "No. I think Riolu has to be here. I don't know why. I just do. He's okay though. I can feel it."

Brock eyed him for a moment, looking at the Pokemon again and nodded. Though small and still asleep, Riolu's breathing was strong, and it already moved a few times in Ash's arms. If he truly thought the little Pokemon was in immediate danger, Brock would have insisted more. He didn't though. Instead, he grabbed his bag and said, "I'll be back as soon as I can!" He tore off in the direction of the road, intending on following it but staying in the tree line, just in case.

They watched him go for a moment before Max broke the silence. "What does he mean by alone time? Wouldn't they be alone on the date?"

May shrugged her shoulders, glancing over at the remaining teenagers. Ash's cheeks turned pink at Max's question and he focused on Riolu, while Misty just scuffed her shoe on the ground and let out an annoyed groan. "You'll find out when you're older."

Ash stared down at Riolu, and just for a moment, the Pokemon's eyes opening just a crack, red irises staring up at him. He felt something; it was a good thing, but it was hard to identify. Pikachu let out a small 'chaa' from his shoulder, and Riolu closed his eyes again. He seemed...content.

Turning back to the others, he looked at May and Max and made a decision. "Who knows what's happening inside, but we can't leave Professor Oak in there alone." He took a few steps towards May. "You and Max are going to stay here."

"What?!" they both exclaimed together.

"It makes sense," Misty agreed. "Someone needs to be the backup, to keep an eye on things from out here. Besides, if we all go in, we'll just attract more attention." She didn't mention it, but there was also the fact that Max didn't own any Pokemon. It was horrible to think, but in this type of situation, the young boy would be more of a liability than anything else.

"Not just that," Ash said and held out his arms. "May, I need you both to watch Riolu for me. I can't take him in there with me."

May's sapphire eyes studied him for a moment, turning to Misty. She smiled encouragingly, and May looked back at Ash, nodding her head. "We'll take good care of him, I promise." She reached out, carefully taking the baby Pokemon into her arms. It shifted for a moment, but then settled down, small snores rising up from it. "But, if anything goes wrong, I'm coming to help you. Max will be able to watch Riolu."

Ash seemed unsure about that, but Misty put her hand on his shoulder. Ash glanced over at her, even though her attention was focused on the Maple siblings and not him. "I'd trust you both with Togepi too. You'll both do fine." That wasn't a mistake on her part. She had been so overly-protective with Togepi, yet she would trust the egg Pokemon (before he evolved) with them.

Ash knew more than most how she could be with baby Pokemon, and he slowly nodded his head. "Right. If there's any trouble, come running. Mist, leave anything behind that's not necessary."

"Like you need to tell me twice. Come on, let's head down to the water and see if there's a way in."

He nodded and looked back at his other friends. "Be careful. Let's go, Pikachu."

"Chu Pikapi! Pikachupi!"

...

"Ash?" Misty didn't look at him as she spoke, her eyes scanning the cliffside that supported the castle, looking for some type of sewer or water duct to get them inside. She glanced briefly at Pikachu, who was carefully hopping from rock to rock, trying to see if he could smell a way in.

"Hmmm?"

"You know that what happened to Riolu's egg wasn't your fault, right?" she asked as she took a step out onto a boulder and looked down. Though Misty wasn't scared of heights by any means, that didn't mean she liked looking down at spots where she could fall and easily get hurt by some of the other boulders.

"I know," Ash said with a sigh as he jumped down closer to the water. "I just...I didn't even think about him, Mist. What kind of trainer does that make me?"

"It makes you normal," she assured him as she started to follow him down. Misty was going to say more on the subject, but lost her footing, and let out a surprised yelp as she pitched forward, her heart feeling like it jumped up into her throat as gravity took hold.

Ash heard the sound and whipped around, both curious and worried. A surprised sound escape his lips as he was assaulted by a face-full of short, orange hair, Misty's weight crashing into him and sending them both into the water with a great splash.

The shock of the icy water did little to stop Ash from kicking back to the surface almost immediately, choking out the liquid that he involuntarily inhaled. He looked around as Misty popped up beside him, watching as she pushed her hair out of her eyes and looked at him for a moment.

"Pikapi? Pikachupi?" The electric Pokemon jumped down onto one of the rocks close to the water, tilting his head as he stared at them with worried, intelligent eyes.

"The water's freezing," Ash finally managed to gasp out, moving his limbs to try and generate some warmth in them. "So much for graceful."

"Shut up," Misty growled, her teeth chattering as she treaded water with much more ease than him.

"Waterflower talent all the way."

She splashed him and turned away in a huff, but her sea-green eyes went wide as she finally caught sight of what they were looking for. "Ash!"

He peered around her shoulder, a dark, rather ominous, manmade tunnel coming into view, and his rather grim look appeared on his face again. The time for joking had passed by again, and now the whole situation came back to him. With a sigh, as looked at Misty and said, "Mist, you seriously don't have to come with me."

She blinked with surprise and looked at him, her eyes studying his as if she was trying to read whatever was running through her mind. Her brow furrowed as she motioned at the tunnel with her hand. "Yes, I do need to. Those Mirage Pokemon are ridiculously strong, but if we work together, we might be able to beat them." Her expression softened. "We fight a lot, but we're a good team and you know it."

"I know, I just..." Ash hesitated, mentally struggling with what he was trying to say. He couldn't think of another way that wasn't completely straight forward. "I saved you last time – from those things in the Tree of Beginning, but I could only do that with sheer dumb luck. I guess I am known for that, but what if it doesn't happen this time?"

Misty smacked his shoulder, and he let out a yelp, the frigid water causing it to sting more than it normally would. "Don't be stupid. Yeah, I might get into trouble, but most of the time, I can save myself. I'm not some weak little damsel and you know it. You, on the other hand, attract trouble worse than anyone else I know, so I need to be there to help you. Don't argue with me. You know it's true."

He wanted to argue, he really did, but he knew that she was right. Ash always did admire how Misty could hold her own, though she did need help from time to time too. In general, he was the one that needed her help more, or so past experiences seemed to show.

That thought made him falter a bit. It really was all about him when she travelled with him, wasn't it? He never meant for that to happen, he wanted his friends to reach their goals and be successful too. He just wanted them to do it with him, but if they constantly had to look after him...

Ash shook his head. Now wasn't the time for those thoughts. No, now was a time of action. He'd just get himself confused otherwise and he needed to be focused. For Professor Oak and Doctor Young.

"Don't think; it doesn't suit you." He started at Misty, and wanted to snap back, but he had been thinking almost the same thing. He silently watched as she took out a pokeball. "We'll use Corphish and Goldeen to help us glide through the water so we're not splashing or anything."

"Goldeen?"

"She's a good swimmer, and I can't use poor Staryu."

That's right, she was already a Pokemon down. Then again, so was he. Ash was more than a bit relieved that he had picked up two of his older Pokemon now. They were much more experienced than Grovyle or Corphish, and they'd need that experience right now.

Ash released Corphish into the water and then looked back at Pikachu. "Let's go bud."

"Pi pikachu." He jumped onto Ash's shoulder and the trainer took hold of his water Pokemon. "Alright, follow Misty's orders Corphish. She's the water expert." He glanced over at her, tilting his head curiously when he saw her cheeks turn pink as she held onto Goldeen. "What?"

"Nothing," she shook her head, gaining back her focus. "Alright, glide as best as you can with as little splashing. The smoother the better. Let's hope that tunnel takes us somewhere and doesn't just

run under the whole thing. Be as quiet as you can, we don't want to get detected."

"You got that?" Ash asked his Pokemon.

"Cor Phish!"

"Good, let's go, Goldeen. Corphish."

"Goldeen deen."

"Corphish cor."

As silently as they could, Ash and Misty slipped through the water, towards the dark tunnel beneath the lab, taking deep breaths as they were forced to duck into the freezing and now completely dark water. Neither of them were quite sure what they were getting into, but both knew one thing, they had to be ready for anything.

Sky

We All Fall Down

The life of a pokemon trainer was never an easy one—something that many young trainers didn't realize before they left home. Many were blindsided by the harsh reality that they experienced because they weren't safe at home with their parents to protect them anymore. Most were alone with only their Pokemon; the rare ones traveled with a friend or in groups, and a vast majority of them ended up home before the first year was over, sticking close to home and trying again when they were older. It was partially why Professor Oak set up his classes to pick the top trainers to go out when they were only 10, the others having to wait until they were a little older.

That wasn't the case everywhere, of course; that was very unique to Pallet Town. Most people didn't know about it, and most wouldn't believe it, claiming that Ash was too stupid to have come in the top three of his class. Many people would point out that he had been in three leagues and lost in all three, but what they neglected to realize was how far a very young trainer like him got in the first place. The leagues consisted of many, many experienced trainers and fewer younger ones. He wasn't unique in being able to participate in the leagues and get into the numbered rankings, but it still was impressive, Orange League aside.

It was the same reason people tended to underestimate him and his ability to focus and be serious. Sure, Ash wasn't particularly the brightest light bulb (he came in third in his class, after Gary and Leaf, tying with Joey, but they didn't talk about Joey anymore), but he was still young and slowly developing a mind for strategy. He was brash, but he knew that some situations called for thought first.

Maybe it was just because he had awakened a strange, rare power within him, but he felt like he had mellowed out a little bit in the past couple weeks. Was his aura doing that to him? Maybe. He didn't know. What he did know was that it was really handy when they were submerged in the pitch black water under Doctor Young's lab. Where Misty was blinded, Ash could see almost a glowing, blurry outline of her and their Pokemon. This was something he had been desperately trying to tune out every time he closed his eyes, and he was actually starting to be able to do that, but now he focused on it, able to actually feel how Misty and the Pokemon were doing.

Too bad he couldn't do the same for Professor Oak or Doctor Young. It must have been the mirage field, because it was bending pure energy and matter together into some hacked, bastardized version of Pokemon. He didn't like the feel of it at all, and Ash really wished that he would have trusted his instincts when he first started feeling uncomfortable, before all of this started happening.

Up ahead, light started filtering in from above the water. He urged Corphish to move quicker, because while his aura let him see that everyone was okay, it did not supply him with any sort of oxygen.

Misty saw the light too, and when they could finally see each other again, she pointed up and he nodded. Together, they both surfaced, and Ash tried not to gasp for breath, resenting Misty just for a moment since she seemed fine. Now was not the time for that.

They both looked around the place they were now in, taking in the thick stone walls that seemed much more rundown than the polished ones above. Those were maintained to keep up a show, but these only told the true story about how old this place was.

"What is this place?" he wondered out loud as the Pokemon glided up to a stone ramp that came into the water. It was very convenient, and that put him on edge.

"It's a loading dock of some sort," Misty told him as she looked around. "I don't...understand though. There's no way a boat or anything could get in and out of those tunnels."

"A Pokemon could."

"Yes, but we haven't seen any Pokemon at all."

He couldn't deny that. Instead, he tried to see if there were any cameras around, but he couldn't spot anything that looked even remotely like some sort of recording technology. "It looks unguarded."

"This water's cold, and Mirage Master might not even know about this place." Misty came to the same conclusion as him, and silently urged Goldeen forward. Once her feet came in contact with the eroded, stone ramp, she called her Pokemon back into the pokeball and then climbed up, looking around. "This place looks like it hasn't been kept up."

"The floor's clean though," Ash said, calling Corphish back and glancing at Pikachu, who jumped off of his shoulder to shake off his fur, but then got distracted by one of the crates in the room. "Mom always said that if I didn't vacuum the floor, I'd get dust-Ratatata in my room. This place looks like it should be worse."

Misty didn't hear him. Her entire body went tense, her porcelain skin going even paler as a strangled sound escaped her lips. He managed to stifle a scream as she suddenly jumped behind him, holding onto his arm tightly.

"What? What's wrong?" Ash looked around wildly, searching for whatever it was that startled her. He really wished that he could use his aura to feel things out but now that they were inside, what had to be the running mirage fields was really messing with him. Probably wouldn't happen to someone experienced with aura, but that wasn't him by a long shot.

"There," with a quivering hand, she pointed up to the corner. Ash followed her gaze, and then looked back at her with annoyance.

"Really? A Spinarak web? Do you see it anywhere?"

"No, but that doesn't mean it's not here."

He let out a sigh and shook his head. "Seriously Mist, I thought you found something horrible."

"It is!"

"Pikapi!" Ash shot around yet again and caught Pikachu as he jumped up into his arms, quivering with his fur sticking on end, but not from the static electricity running through him. This was some sort of twisted combination of anger and fear.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Pi." Pikachu pointed towards one of the crates.

"Is it the Spinarak?" Misty asked. She sounded like she was trying to be brave, and while it was a little ridiculous and annoying, Ash couldn't fault her for having a genuine phobia. After all, he had trust issues with Spearow and Aerodactyl after bad things happening involving them too.

"I'll check. You stay here." He pried his arm out of her grip and moved to the crate Pikachu had been near. His first Pokemon clearly didn't want to go back there, instead jumping into Misty's arms and all but growling at it. That was definitely unsettling.

His nose wrinkled as he got closer to it. There must have been something counteracting this smell from afar, a Sweet Scent or something, but it didn't work up close. Ash pried open the top of the crate, and after only a split second, slammed the lid shut again. He spun around and tried to get to the water, but barely managed it as he lurched forward and threw up.

"Pikapi!"

"Ash!"

Both Pikachu and Misty were at his side almost immediately, fear of possibly bug Pokemon forgotten. "Are you okay? What was it?" Her hand was on his back, rubbing it soothingly like she had seen his mother do one time when they were in Pallet Town and he became sick.

"Pokemon."

"Pokemon? I don't—"

"There are dead Pokemon in those crates."

Misty fell silent, her eyes going wide as they darted to the wooden containers and back to him. He felt her shift beside him and shot up, grabbing her arm. "Don't look. It's horrible. Don't look." His voice was urgent, and she didn't need to have aura to feel just how upset he was. "Misty, what is this place? Who would do that?" His normally tanned skin was pale, and his lip quivered just a bit. "They look like they were...experimented on." Cut apart, observed, stitched together, tested on. He only caught a glimpse of it for a second, but that image would be burned in his mind for the rest of his life.

"I don't know." She suddenly wanted to run back to where May and Max were. Though sometimes they seemed to act older, Misty had turned fourteen not that long ago, and Ash would be fourteen in a couple weeks. They were still much too young to be dealing with this type of thing with mutilated Pokemon and a masked man that kidnapped one of the most renowned Pokemon professors in the world. They had just stumbled upon the beginning of a horror story, and she really didn't want to be the idiot to keep pressing forward. Then she really thought of Professor Oak and what could happen to him.

Already, Misty knew that Ash was going to press on. He loved Pokemon dearly, and to see such horrible treatment was unacceptable. She knew him well enough to know that he couldn't let the Mirage Master get away with whatever he had done here.

Misty's fight or flight instincts were screaming at her to run, but she wasn't going to. She was going to stick with Ash, because when was splitting up and leaving someone alone ever a good idea? She needed to keep him from doing something stupid. Besides, Misty wanted to give that monster a piece of her mind too.

"We need to find a way in," she urged him, watching as he scooped some water into his hands, squishing it around his mouth.

He always had some sort of breath mints or gum on him, since other people claimed it shut him up (which was terribly rude, but to be fair, he did like to talk), and he was thankful for that. He didn't need the acidic taste of vomit reminding him of the image that would forever plague his nightmares. He needed to be focused right now.

If Mirage Master put those there to terrify anyone who may have been snooping, congratulations, he was successful. Too bad it only made Ash more determined to find him.

"Let's go."

He looked up and saw Misty's hand, following her arm up to her face. Pikachu was sitting on her shoulder, and both of them had purely determined expressions. They were right with him on this. He nodded his head and took her hand, letting her tug him up.

He was already wet and cold and traumatized, and they had just got inside of the building, but he couldn't complain about any of that right now. Still, Misty's hand was warm in his, and instead of letting go, he held it tightly as they started to walk. He needed a grip on reality, and this was as close as he could get for now.

Pikachu jumped back over to his shoulder, nuzzling his face, and he felt a bit of relief rush through him. He wasn't alone in this horrible place, and he'd never been more relieved to know that he wasn't alone.

"Look," Misty pointed at the floor as they walked down a tunnel, completely surrounded by stone aside from the thick, wooden supports above their heads that looked about ready to crumble.

The little domes that were part of the mirage system were starting to line the floor, though there was nothing back by that little dock. Ash's eyes narrowed at the sight of them. "We need to be careful and watch our step."

"No kidding." She leaned against the wooden door that they came to, the only way out. Sea-green eyes looked back at him, and she shook her head. She didn't hear anyone.

Ash was going to push the door open just a bit and was startled when it felt like something was tugging the same time he was pushing. He put more force than he meant to behind it, and the door swung open into the hall, a loud crashing sound followed by groans echoing through another stone tunnel lined with the domes.

Misty blinked. Ash blinked. Pikachu blinked.

Seriously?

Sprawled in a pile on the floor were three very familiar figures in white and black uniforms, the Pokemon aside.

"Team Rocket?"

"Pi pikachu?"

Jessie, James, and Meowth looked up at them, all visibly startled to see them as well. "Twerps!"

Misty looked highly unimpressed, and Ash shook his head as he demanded, "What are you doing here? And how the hell did you get in here?" He seriously wasn't in the mood for their nonsense, but the second question was entirely valid. He never understood how they just kept appearing everywhere, or how they seemed to sneak into places that didn't have any entrances.

Too bad he didn't have a choice when it came to dealing with their nonsense. The three rebounded from their fall and their shock, jumping up and posing.

"Prepare for trouble!"

"And make it double!"

Ash and Misty sent each other annoyed looks.

"An evil as old as the galaxy!"

"Sent here to fulfill our destiny!"

"With Meowth! That's me!"

"To denounce the evils of truth and love!"

"To extend our reach to the stars above!"

"Jessie!"

"And James!"

"And Meowth's the name!"

"Whenever there's peace in the universe!"

"Team Rocket—"

"—Is there—"

"To make everything worse!"

"Wobbuffet!"

Ash and Misty gaped at them. "Are you serious?" The redhead demanded, her body tensing up as she stood completely straight. "Are you for real? Do you not realize how much danger you're in right now? And you're spouting out your goddamn motto? What did you expect to do? Steal the goddamn system?" They almost sank back at her angered words.

That uncomfortable feeling rushed through Ash again. He tried to warn Misty to be quiet, but it was only when orange light exploded from the doors, reflecting off of the metallic surface of a nearby security camera, that he realized there was no point in telling her to be quiet. They had been caught the second that they got through the door.

A Houndoom, Mightyena, Machoke, Machop, Absol, and Ursaring all materialized in front of them. All snarling and glaring at them.

"Mirage Pokemon!" Misty growled angrily. "But how..." Her eyes fell onto the security camera a moment later. "Well, shit."

"Hey, my ears!" Meowth warned her.

There was no time to address Meowth's comment on Misty's foul language. The Pokemon were all formidable ones in nature, let alone these super-powered Mirage ones. Even Team Rocket seemed to realize this, throwing their hands into the air in surrender.

"Hey! Time out! It's obvious from your vicious growls that we're all on the same side!"

"Lighten up! We just want your mirage system design plans!"

"So can we all just play nice?"

The Houndoom answered Meowth's question with a vicious snarl and a clear statement of its name.

Almost instantly, the feline went on the defense. "Hey! It's bad enough coming from her, but we don't need this from you! They're mocking us!"

That instantly shifted Jessie and James, and instead, the three of them lunged forward to defend their pride. Ash and Misty would have taken the opportunity to run, but the Pokemon had wisely surrounded them on almost all sides. No doubt if they tried to run back into the door, another one would appear in there.

Ash almost felt bad when Team Rocket was met with an over-powered Flamethrower, crashing through the wall and blasting off again, but he had no time to think of them. The Mirage Pokemon were already turning his attention to him and Misty.

"Pikachu," he muttered quietly.

"Pi!" The rodent jumped from his shoulder, small sparks escaping his cheeks and he growled.

Misty was reaching for one of her pokeballs when Ash felt it. This Mirage Pokemon felt all wrong, twisted and artificial. They made him uncomfortable even if he could still feel them. There was something else in the room now too though. This one felt different. It wasn't like them, but it wasn't as real as Pikachu felt either.

He looked around, and that's when he saw it. Its small form hovered behind the other Mirage Pokemon, but it had the same faint glow about it. Ash was almost instantly pulled back into a place far away, holding a small, pink, feline Pokemon in his arms as he felt its life fading away.

Mew.

The distraction was only a small one, but it was still costly as the Mirage Pokemon took them by surprise, charging at them. Pikachu jumped into the air without a command, his powerful electricity surrounding his entire body as he used a powerful Thundershock against them.

It threw the Houndoom back, but the Absol made contact and threw Pikachu back. The Pokemon let out a pained cry as it slammed into the stone wall, crumbling to the floor.

"Pikachu!" Ash let go of Misty's hand and fell to the ground, not even noticing a pokeball fall from his belt. Luckily, she did and picked it up for him. He picked up the injured Pokemon and was immediately surrounded. It was one hit, and the most powerful Pokemon on his team was easily taken out. What chance did his other ones have?

"Gyara—let go of me!" Snapping around, Ash watched as the Machoke grabbed Misty's hand tightly, preventing her from releasing her most powerful Pokemon. She let out a cry of pain as it squeezed her fist, and that sound prompted Ash to move.

Holding Pikachu, he shot towards her, only to be grabbed around the middle by four powerful arms. He struggled, crying out as Pikachu fell from his arms. He could feel his aura building up in him despite the interference of the mirage system, and it almost seemed like the Machamp flickered for a moment or something. The Mirage Pokemon seemed to notice this too and called out to its pre-evolved form.

Misty let out a scream and Ash swung around to face Misty as best as she could. The Machoke was carrying her under his arm, but the other one was reaching out and twisting her arm uncomfortably. He was glaring at Ash, and the message was clear. Any funny stuff, and they would hurt her.

Despite his desperation, Ash managed to quiet the power in himself, and the Machoke let go of her arm. Misty whimpered. Her face was twisted up in pain as she held onto her rapidly bruising hand

and arm.

"Pikapi! Pikachupi!" The electric-type tried to push himself up off of the floor, but Ursaring picked him up and squeezed him tightly. Already injured, the small Pokemon let out an agonizing cry that only made Ash struggle more. All three of them were captured, and there was no chance of help coming anytime soon.

They all struggled against their captives, and as he twisted around, Ash caught sight of the Mew. It hadn't helped them, but it didn't join in the attack. As they were carried away, he could actually feel something coming from the Mirage Mew that he couldn't feel anything from the others.

It felt like remorse.

...

There was no telling how far they ended up walking, but all of them were quick to realize that the laboratory was much, much bigger than they first anticipated. It must have gone on for kilometers underground; they had the perfect view of that as they walked over stone bridges that overlapped other stone bridges, and for some strange reason, they were unable to see the bottom below, but none of them took the time to wonder why.

It wasn't the time to think about that. It was the time to try and escape.

"Let go of them!" Ash snarled at the Pokemon, still keeping a lid on his aura. Just because he didn't want to use that, not wanting to cause more pain for Misty or Pikachu, didn't mean that he wasn't going to fight. He didn't care what happened to him, as long as Misty and Pikachu were okay. They were both much more injured than he was, and he'd do almost anything to get them to safety. Even if it meant leaving Professor Oak behind.

They desperately needed help.

"Pi."

Ash looked back again and saw that Pikachu was fully-conscious again and already struggling. There was no way he'd be able to run back in time, but maybe...

"Pikachu! You need to get free and tell May and Max to find Brock and Officer Jenny! We really need help!" He let out a cry of pain as the Machop squeezed his ribs tight enough to hurt them, but not break them.

Using the anger that rushed through him, Pikachu managed to summon all the electricity he could into his battered body. He tried to shock the Ursaring, but it just snorted in disbelief at him.

Pikachu was not going to settle for mockery from this fake. He let out a yell of his name as he released a powerful thunder attack, electrocuting the pokemon holding him. He tried again and again, but while he was hurting Ursaring a bit, it was still much too strong.

"The stones!" Ash looked back at Misty, who cringed as Machop jerked her arm. "Ash! The gemstone things that create the Mirage Pokemon!"

He stared at her blankly, but as his dark eyes shifted to look at what she was talking about, it hit him what Misty was trying to say. Why hadn't he thought about that? "Pikachu! Aim for that!"

"Pi-ka-CHU!" Thunder raced through the air, shattering the surface of the stone. Ursaring howled in pain and let go of Pikachu, who flopped to the floor but quickly got up again.

"Run!" Ash cried to his Pokemon. Absol and Houndoom bounded at Pikachu, who launched an attack at them instead.

The two Pokemon jumped aside, but the lightning kept going. Machamp and Machop stumbled in opposite directions, and the stone beneath their feet shattered. Machamp spun around to try and catch his footing, but Ash slipped out of his grip. He fell, crying out as his head slammed onto the stone railing, and he fell to the ground. He tried to push himself up, but there was so much pain, and he felt so sick and dizzy. Everything seemed fuzzy, and he couldn't really concentrate on anything, closing his eyes.

That was until pained screech forced him to open his eyes again. It was almost like watching slow motion as Machoke hit the railing, and Misty slipped off of his shoulder and fell.

"Misty!" Pure terror rushed through him as he managed to jump up from the floor, injured head be damned. He tried to rush to the edge, as if he'd be able to pull her back up somehow, but Machamp got to him first. He tried to avoid the Pokemon, but ended up slamming into the ground again, black spots dancing over his vision. He could hear Pikachu's horrified cries, and Ash could just picture those poor Pokemon who had died so horribly and were just tossed aside in crates as mass graves. Probably rolled out periodically and submerged into the water. He didn't want Pikachu to end up like that.

"Run. Pikachu! Run!" He was desperate, and he put everything he had into that command. Pikachu, he could see him out of the corner of his eye, managed to dart around the Pokemon, looking over his shoulder once as he disappeared.

Ash wished that he could be relieved that Pikachu would at least escape, that he'd be safe, but he couldn't feel anything. He was entirely numb as he faded in and out of consciousness. He was vaguely aware of a pale pink form hovering over him, and then something, probably Machamp again, picking him up, but it didn't matter.

Misty was gone. She had been right there, and now she was gone. She shouldn't even have been there. This was his fault. The physical pain was nothing right now because he felt like he couldn't breathe as he was hauled away from the ruined bridge, the Pokemon continuing on their trek to wherever it was they were going.

He closed his eyes, because it was physically too painful to keep them open. Blood streaked down his face, dripping onto the floor in small, scarlet drops, as he was carried away, mingling with the tears that unwillingly started to escape him.

"Misty." As he gave into the darkness that urged to consume him, Ash could only feel numbness.

She was dead, and it was his fault.

Sky

Calling The Cavalry

Ash was wrong. Misty wasn't dead, but she was sure that she would be soon as she fell. She grasped for anything, missing ledges that would have broken her fingers had she actually managed to touch them. She grasped a pokeball in her hand and stared at it. The one that fell from Ash's belt earlier. Her Pokemon were useless, but maybe she got lucky and grabbed Heracross who could catch her.

She flipped end over end and found herself staring at the polished floor of yet another bridge in this ridiculous room. It was either Heracross or she'd be crushed.

"Pokeball go!"

It wasn't Heracross that appeared below her, but it did stop her from slamming into the hard floor. The bridge groaned under the weight of the Pokemon, but she could only let out a cry of relief as she crashed into the large, soft stomach of Ash's Snorlax. Her relief didn't last long though, as she rolled off of him and towards the railing. With a gasp, she twisted around and managed to hang on to the ledge, determined not to fall again. A scream escaped her lips as her injured wrist and arm pained in protest of suddenly holding up her weight. She shook from the pain, but her adrenaline was overpowering it.

"Snorlax, lax?"

"Don't move," Misty told him, her heart beating wildly as she heard cracks and felt the bridge shift. Her mind shot back to the room with the crate of deceased Pokemon, remembering how rundown it had been. Though they looked new, Misty got the feeling that these bridges were for show and weren't nearly as sturdy as they looked. Otherwise, how could a single thunderbolt attack destroy one so easily?

Snorlax was a good pillow; he saved her life, but now he was an unintentional danger. "Just stay there or it might break. I'm okay." She wasn't, but if he moved, she could definitely fall. Tears of frustration welled up in her eyes, because this wasn't how things were supposed to end. She wasn't supposed to fall to her death and Ash wasn't—

Oh God, Ash. He had seen her fall. She heard him yell her name, and he hadn't come tumbling after her (much to her relief). She knew that he would have seen the massive drop, that he would have tried to do something to save her but couldn't. He probably thought she was dead.

Misty remembered back to how painful it had been when she thought he was dead, swallowed up by the orange, Pokemon-shaped blobs that were protecting the Tree of Beginning. He had saved her then, pushing her out of the way and getting trapped himself, but creating a shield around her so they wouldn't attack her even after he was gone. It was only a few weeks ago now, and the memory of how upset and how horrified she had been was still fresh in her mind. Knowing Ash might have been going through that (she was fairly sure he'd be upset over any friend, but she knew that she was a little more than just a normal friend to him, so it should warrant a stronger reaction) was unacceptable.

"Be brave. You're strong and awesome, Misty. You can do this," she muttered as she grabbed Snorlax's pokeball again, holding on tightly with one hand. "Return, Snorlax!" The Pokemon vanished, and the bridge stopped creaking. She tossed the pokeball up onto the ground as she grabbed on with both hands again, her feet scrambling to find something to steady herself with. A

groove, a crack, anything. She was Misty Waterflower, and she was not going to let some insanely-powered Pokemon that weren't even real and ridiculous architecture beat her.

She tried to pull herself up, but as she did, the bricks came loose and she started to fall again. Misty didn't even have the time to scream, a strangled gasp escaping her lips instead as she plummeted back. She didn't fall far this time though, feeling a pair of smaller hands grab onto her arm.

Misty's eyes shot open and she looked up, sea-green meeting determined sapphire blue.

"May!"

The younger girl smiled at her encouragingly. "I've got you!" The brunette looked behind her. "Come on, guys! Pull!"

May's Pokemon helped her pull Misty back up onto the solid bridge, but much to her embarrassment, Misty's knees gave out, and she fell to the floor. Her heart was pounding wildly, and adrenaline rushed through her as she realized she had almost died. She would have fallen if it wasn't for May showing up.

May knelt down in front of her, and it was only when she took Misty's hands into her own that the redhead realized how badly she was shaking. It wasn't just mental or emotional; her body was aching now and she felt like her wrist was going to fall off. It was sprained or broken already, and she had to hold herself up with it. It was that or die.

With the compassion of someone much older than her, May asked, "What happened? Where are Ash and Pikachu?" She wasn't going to ask if the redhead was okay though. That didn't seem like a very appropriate question at the moment, and she didn't want to make Misty upset.

Those two names make Misty snap out of her distress. They were still back with the Mirage Pokemon!

"We have to find them," she gasped almost desperately. "May, you don't understand. We weren't even here long and—this place is horrible. We have to find them or we might never be able to." She had tears in her eyes, even if she didn't mean to. "This place—I—how did you even find me?"

"I had some help." May looked over her shoulder, though her hands squeezed Misty reassuringly. "Think you can find him for us?"

"Ri! Riolu!"

Misty followed May's gaze and saw a very small but very determined Riolu standing before her, looking ready to take on whatever horrors had befallen his trainer.

"I'll explain on the way! You can tell me your side too!" May assured Misty as she helped her up, taking a moment to let the shaking teenager to get her footing back. "Come on! We have to save your boyfriend!"

"He's not..." She trailed off. Well technically there was the implication that he was, given that he knew she liked him and she knew that he liked her, but now was not the time to think of that never-ending conundrum. Now was not the time for those thoughts though. "Whatever. Let's go."

...

A while earlier, May and Max sat on the ground, keeping the castle-laboratory in sight while still staying out of sight themselves. May hummed quietly as she rocked the sleeping Riolu in her arms,

the Pokemon tossing and turning from time to time, accompanied by a whimper as if it was trapped in a nightmare.

"You're good with baby Pokemon, you know," Max spoke up suddenly, and May turned her attention to him. He was drawing patterns on the ground, some sort of nonsense that didn't really make sense to her. He was so smart that it was hard not to be jealous sometimes, but over time, she was learning that the books didn't always equal real life, especially when it came to Pokemon. There were always so many different variables—things that no one could predict.

Still, he was smart and hearing him actually compliment her made a smile appear on her face. "Thanks." May looked down at Riolu. "I've never actually taken care of a baby-baby this long before. I hope that someday I'll meet one that can look at me like Togepi did with Misty or even like this guy did for Ash earlier even if it was just a moment." She giggled. "Wouldn't it be cute to teach a Pokemon to say 'love you' or something?"

Max made a face. "Sure, I guess." He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Most Pokemon can't though. Meowth is the only one I've actually seen teach itself, which is actually amazingly impressive; don't mention it when he's around. Otherwise, telepathy aside, I don't think it's possible."

"Sure it is," May insisted as she looked down at Riolu again, her smile fading. "Do you think he knows telepathy?"

"Well, if it really is the Lucario that we met come back to life, probably." He dark brown eyes narrowed slightly. "I still don't understand that. Ash said he felt part of Lucario's aura move on, but then part of him came back to live on. I don't get it."

May stared at her brother again, so smart yet so confused. For the most part, he was like her exact opposite, book smart where she wasn't but less accepting of ideas that went against what he already knew than she was. Even their appearances were opposite: her with brown hair and blue eyes, him with blue hair and brown eyes. So maybe that was why she didn't feel all confused about that. "It's easy. A part of Lucario lives on to experience life to the fullest, but most of him went with Sir Aaron where he belonged. We just need to treat this little guy like his own Pokemon. That's all."

Max looked like he was about to comment when Riolu's eyes suddenly snapped open. The little Pokemon looked around wildly, red eyes darting every which way. He finally settled on the lab and pointed at it. "Ri riolu ri."

"What? What's wrong?"

"Riolu!" It was amazing how coordinated even newly hatched Pokemon could be. They generally already knew how to talk, they knew how to walk, and they knew how to fight. This little guy jumped from May's arms, wobbling a little bit on the ground before he ran a few steps and pointed at the lab again, speaking almost desperately.

"Is something wrong?" May asked him, her brow furrowing.

"Ri!" It nodded.

"How could it...do you think it has to do with Ash's aura?"

"Maybe," May agreed as she stood up. "We can't take the chance though. If something bad is happening, we have to help." She paused for a moment as Max stood up. "Well, I have to help; you wait here for Brock and Officer Jenny. We're probably going to need more help than just me, and

they need to know what's going on."

"But—I—all right." He pouted. "Just be careful."

She nodded her head. Looking down at Riolu, May asked, "Do you know a way in? I don't know where Ash and Misty went."

"Ri riolu!" He nodded and darted off. May ran after him, surprised that the baby Pokemon could move that quickly. He waited for her outside of a giant hole in the wall, the one that she had seen Team Rocket fly through earlier. It was just Team Rocket though, so she didn't really think anything of it.

Putting on a brave face, May nodded at Riolu and said, "Let's go."

...

"You weren't supposed to injure him, you idiotic Pokemon!"

Ash was slowly coming around as he heard the deep, altered-sounding voice of the Mirage Master. The pain came rushing back to him as he blinked opened his eyes, wincing at the light. It took him a moment to focus, not really realizing that he was being moved around until a cold metal touched his already pale, shivering skin. He looked around with unfocused eyes, seeing a wall of video monitors, controls, and other weird machines.

"Let him go!" He looked around again at the familiar voice, his eyes locking on to the dark blue, alarmed ones of Professor Oak. That expression looked so familiar, but Ash couldn't place it. The older man struggled against the restraints that held him on an uncomfortable, metal chair.

"And let this chance pass by?" The Mirage Master looked over Ash, hitting a few buttons on the control panel in his hand, though it looked like he was having a hard time doing so. There was something wrong with his hand that Ash hadn't noticed before. That was a weakness, and it was something he could use somehow. Wouldn't Misty be proud of him for noticing that?

Misty. The name hit him hard. Misty was dead, and maybe he did have his share of the blame, but it was this monster's fault. This was the one who killed all those Pokemon and discarded them. This was the thing that sent those Mirage Pokemon after them, which ultimately led to Misty falling.

The numbness and the depression were gone. Surprising everyone, Ash jerked up and tried to take a swing at him, but one of his wrists was already locked in a metal clasp. He didn't land a hit, but he did manage to grab the Mirage Master's hand, watching with a little bit of satisfaction as he jerked back in pain.

"Hold him down!"

"You son of a bitch!" Ash yelled at him (not caring about the language he was using, even if Professor Oak was sitting right there), feeling something growing inside of him as the Machoke from earlier appeared, holding him down as he struggled against being restrained, but it was no use, and soon his other wrist and his ankles were locked down. "You killed her! And all of those Pokemon!"

"Killed?" Professor Oak sounded confused and worried.

"I see you found my disposal sight. Brilliant of you to think of coming in that way," the Mirage Master moved around. "They were experiments that led to my ultimate success, a worthy sacrifice." He pressed a few buttons on his control, and what looked like some sort of metal cap appeared

above Ash's head. He tossed his hat aside and fit it over him. "It was a pity about the girl though. She had potential to wield power, should she have joined my cause. Rest assured, she would have died immediately from the impact of that fall. I'll have to send someone out to clean up the mess later."

Ash tried to jerk up again in anger, and Professor Oak let out a low, horrified sound. "Ash, is he talking about—?" Whatever Professor Oak wanted to say died on his lips.

Machoke was thrown across the room in a heap as a power wave of invisible energy ripped in the room, destroying screens and tossing aside the Mirage Pokemon. No one noticed them all flicker slightly for a moment before becoming solid again and straightening themselves up.

"That was very interesting," Mirage Master said as he approached the restrained, panting boy.

"Misty," Ash mumbled almost wildly as he blinked away the tears that threatened to overtake him again, completely ignoring Mirage Master. "Misty's gone." Whatever was happening now, he wanted no part of it. His head was throbbing, and it was probably because of that injury that nothing was really making sense to him anymore and his thoughts were so jumbled.

He loomed over Ash, looking down at him with his eerie, metal mask. "Such a rare power flows through you, and you're well aware of it, aren't you, boy? Aura. Only a handful of people in the world even have the potential to have that ability, but there's only one known person trained in the art. You yourself saw it, Oak." He turned his attention towards the Professor. "You can't deny that you're curious and confounded how you never noticed it, aren't you? How one of your trainers, a pathetic one at that, had such rare abilities. Orange Island Champion. Everyone knows that's a complete joke and should be overlooked." He looked back down at Ash. "Still, I never dreamt that I could test that power. If I can duplicate it and give it to my Pokemon, well, very little can stop me once they can control the very energy that gives us all life."

Professor Oak was silent before he demanded, "Let him go now!"

"Absolutely not. This system was made to extract Pokemon memories, but people aren't so different. This will be a first that I simply can't pass by."

Ash slowly processed the conversation happening around him, things clicking into place. This monster wanted to use his aura, to duplicate it and give it to the monsters he was creating. Ash couldn't let that happen. Though he wasn't experienced with aura and knew so little about it, he knew it was his job to protect it. He also knew that it couldn't be duplicated—not like how Mirage Master was implying, at least. Maybe the Pokemon could learn Aura Sphere, but even Ash himself wasn't too good with that. He could shield people with relative ease, having done so earlier to protect Max. Offensive was different for him. Ash wished that he did know something now, not just let this power lash out of him. He could hurt someone like that—the one thought that plagued him since he found out.

This power was his though and he was going to try to use it. He tried to focus to create an Aura Sphere when Mirage Master moved back to his controls.

A cry of pain escaped his lips as the power from the machine rushed through him, but he focused on trying to get enough power to break the metal; easier said than done when it felt like his mind was being torn apart. It was too late; the monster had already begun to look at his memories, turning them into blurred videos on the screen.

He was not going to let him see anything about aura though. That was the last thing he needed this thing to be able to duplicate. If he could at least stop that, if he could stop him, then at least Misty wouldn't have died in vain.

The video on the screen started getting snowy and skipping, completely overlooking anything that happened at the Tree of Beginning. It was hard fighting his own thoughts, to try and keep the memories down when they were being ripped out of him. He relaxed a bit once they were farther back, but then he realized his mistake as the Mirage Master paused the screen and Professor Oak gasped.

"Rayquaza and Deoxys," Oak said in awe.

"Interesting." Mirage Master looked at Ash. "There's more in that head of yours than it seems, isn't there?" He typed on the control panel. "Changing search parameters for Legendary Pokemon." It was really quiet, but Ash still managed to catch his mumble of, "I could be the first to study them scientifically. Not just as legends."

Oh god. Ash realized why this masked man felt so familiar now that he was really focusing and really trying to use his Aura. Why he would have sworn up and down that he had met him before. Because he had.

The pain ripped through him as the man turned on the machine. Ash let out a pained groan, but he tried to fight through it. He couldn't let him see them, not the Legendary Pokemon. It was his job to protect them. It was never actually stated, but he knew it was true. They trusted him, and he would keep them safe with every last breath he took. Not because he explicitly had to, but because he would never forgive himself otherwise.

Misty would never forgive him.

Though he managed to keep the images of Mew, Regirock, Regice, and Registeel from appearing since they were at the epicentre of his recent adventure where he learned more about himself than he ever had before, he was failing.

The Groudon and Kyogre that had been awakened by Team Magma appeared on the screen, followed by Jirachi being hugged by a teary-eyed Max. A Latias with tears falling from her eyes, a Latios flying away for the last time before perishing.

Maybe it was just his imagination, but Professor Oak gasp as the screen showed a Suicune jumping across a lake, turning the water crystal-clear again, and brown-haired, blue-eyed boy that was misplaced in time was holding a Celebi.

The images changed again to an Entei and a Charizard viciously fighting in a twisted crystal and ice castle. Then again to a powerful Lugia hovering in the air before diving back into the sea as Articuno, Zapdos, and Moltres flew back towards their individual islands.

The next one was blurry and confusing though. Mew was there, hovering with pink light surrounding it on what looked like a battle field, various other doubles of Pokemon viciously fighting each other with their claws and their teeth.

"What is that?" Professor Oak exclaimed as the Pokemon that Mew was facing appeared. He had been protesting the entire time, trying to get the man to turn off the machine, but was unable to. It had slightly similar features, though it was much taller and had white and purple fur. Ash wasn't surprised that Professor Oak was confused. While he deserved his own life and tried to find his own place in the world, Mewtwo was never supposed to exist.

The last image that appeared was on the very first day of Ash's journey and was simply just a colourful Pokemon flying across the sky. He had been confused at the time, and though it was a Pokemon that Ash had never actually met face to face, he knew enough now to know that it was

Ho-oh.

The pain stopped as the screen turned off, the machine following soon later. He slumped back down, fighting the bile that crept up his throat. He failed. He tried to stop this mad man from seeing them, but he couldn't.

"Ash! Ash are you okay?" Oak called out to him. Ash managed to open his eyes again and look at the Professor, and maybe it was his injuries, specifically his head injury and the emotional agony that plagued him any time Misty entered his mind, but he felt and must have looked entirely defeated.

"I'm sure this boy has much more information locked away in his mind," Mirage Master said, actually putting a hand on Ash's head. "I wouldn't expect such an unimpressive trainer to have so much experience with Legendary Pokemon, let alone having the ability to use aura himself."

"Don't touch him!"

"Of course, if you were to give me access to your research database, I wouldn't need to dig into his mind anymore. Anything else he's seen would have been stored in your system." The Mirage Master looked down at Ash. "Though perhaps it would be a kindness to toss you aside like the girl."

Ash closed his eyes again, only able to move enough to look away. The corner of his eyes prickled with tears as his chest tightened, and he felt sick to his stomach. His pain wasn't just physical, though that wasn't to be overlooked. Ash didn't know how to describe it; he'd never felt this way before. Not even when Pikachu was lost, though that might have been because there was always hope that they'd find him again.

That wasn't the case here.

"I'll do it," Professor Oak spoke up, his voice shaking. "Take the restraints off of both of us, and I'll give you the password."

Ash felt the metal restraints that cut into his wrists and ankles retract, and while he did move a bit, he didn't try to stand up. He wasn't sure he could right now. Professor Oak appeared above him, looking at him carefully with worried, horrified eyes. Ash could feel it. He wasn't the only one feeling guilty. Professor Oak was brimming with it, probably stemming from the fact that the old man was unable to protect neither him nor Misty. He was horrified, worried, ashamed, and so much more that it was actually starting to hurt Ash's head.

"Put in the password." Mirage Master held out a control panel.

Oak stared up at him for a moment, blue eyes almost challenging him before he typed the password in quickly. It was long and complex, with upper and lowercased letters, numbers, and special characters. Once it was in though, and the screen above them showed that the password worked, Professor Oak reached down and helped Ash up into a sitting position, a groan escaping his lips as he was moved.

"Ash, are you okay?" Instead of just nodding to encourage someone like he normally would have, Ash was the type to whine about little things like a paper cut and a stubbed toe, but keep larger injuries to himself, he shook his head just slightly and closed his eyes.

"Your database is most impressive, Professor," Mirage Master said. "Combined with the data I've taken from that boy, I will be able to create the perfect Pokemon. Through this, I will be able to

access the shared databases of all the other researchers and hospitals out there, even the Pokemon League. Nothing will stop my perfect creation!"

Oak tensed up, and Ash found the strength to look up at him. He wasn't panicking yet, and that caught him off-guard. This sounded like a huge thing; shouldn't he be more worried? As if feeling Ash's eyes on him, Oak looked down and smiled. "Don't worry. He's already doomed himself."

"Your memories of Mewtwo are not the first I've encountered," Mirage Master spoke up, having completely missed their exchange. He turned around to face them, and though they couldn't see through his metal mask, Ash just knew that he was grinning like a mad man. "Watch as the most powerful Pokemon—the most powerful Mirage Pokemon—is created before your very eyes." He motioned to where a black sphere was starting to form.

Ash physically recoiled from the feel of it. It was all wrong. This wasn't energy. This wasn't life and aura. This was horrible. Like it would keep him safe, Ash reached inside of himself, feeling his own power actually truly listen to him for the first time since he came into the laboratory to find Professor Oak. It was strange, because when he was focusing with his eyes closed, it was almost like he could see slightly different colours, depending on the person, but that was minimal—different shades of blue and green. What he did notice was how Professor Oak felt warm, while the Mirage Master felt cold. There the new Mirage Pokemon was forming, it was almost like a void—a black whole sucking in the natural energy around it and then releasing it again as a corrupted form of the original. That's what they really were though, weren't they? They weren't real.

Then again, there was that Mew, and it felt different all together.

Ash's eyes snapped open again. The world's most powerful Pokemon? He knew exactly what was coming, and the only thing that Ash was entirely certain of anymore was that this would turn out badly for everyone.

...

Misty and May ran through the corridors, wondering why they had yet to be stopped by any more Mirage Pokemon. Wondered being the key word as neither of them were going to complain.

"Ri!" Riolu cried out, suddenly pointing at something. He had taken up a spot on the back of Misty's shoulders, holding onto her hair carefully to support itself. She didn't mind, despite the occasional tugging. Riolu was so small that it didn't bother her at all.

Her sea green eyes looked in the direction Riolu pointed, and she gasped. "Pikachu!"

"Pika...chupi?" Pikachu looked completely exhausted. He blinked his tired eyes up at her as if he had just seen a ghost. Small tears appeared in his eyes, and a happy sound escaped him as he jumped up and Misty caught him. He nuzzled his face into her shirt, shaking slightly, before he looked up again. Pikachu stared at Riolu, tilting his head curiously.

"Riolu ri lu io."

"Pi pikachu pi pika."

"Riolu rio."

"Pikapi."

"Riori."

Pikachu nodded his head and pointed. While neither Misty nor May could translate what they were just saying, not the way Ash always just seemed to know what his Pokemon were saying, both recognized the word 'Pikapi' a Pikachu's name for Ash.

"You know where he is?" Misty asked him.

"Chaa." Pikachu nodded his head, but then pointed at Misty and mimed something with his hands. Pikachu had always been good at trying to express what he wanted to say, even to those who couldn't understand him. She understood almost immediately what he was trying to get across. "Pikapi." He finished his motions with that word. Pikachu was trying to tell her that Ash had seen her fall, and she was right earlier. He didn't take it very well at all.

Her gut twisted uncomfortably, and she looked over at May. "Look, whatever's about to happen is going to be danger. You sure you're up for this?"

Sapphire eyes shone with determination. "You bet I am. Nothing is going to stop us!" May held up her hand, and a smile appeared on Misty's face as she clasped May's hand, nodding her head.

"Let's go."

...

"You have to believe me!" Brock slammed his hands onto Officer Jenny's desk. While he had been overcome with her beauty when he first stumbled into the police station, the memory that his friends were inside with the Mirage Master prompted him to be serious.

Unfortunately, it seemed that this Officer Jenny knew who he was. Well, of course she should, he'd recognize her too out of any of them. They all looked so different but were all very attractive in their own right. It was unfortunate in this case, because it seemed his reputation as a lady killer was stopping her from taking his claims seriously.

To be fair, he did just claim that Mirage Pokemon under the control of someone in a metal mask had kidnapped a world renowned Professor as well as Doctor Young. Not only could Officer Jenny not find any record of the laboratory in the area, which would have been required to be on file should assistance be needed, but she didn't seem to believe his claims either. He had run all that way, and it had taken much longer than he thought it would. Now he was standing there, arguing with one of the loves of his life while his friends could be in danger.

Sorry Brock. It looked like she wasn't the one in this case.

"I wish I could help, but nothing your saying is making sense. The area you're talking about doesn't belong to Doctor Young. I've never even heard of him," she said sternly.

"Really? That's your concern?" Brock snapped back at her. "My friends are in danger, and you won't even investigate that? What kind of police officer are you? I've been arguing with you for who knows how long! They could be dead for all I know!"

Her bright brown eyes flashed with anger, but before she could snap back at him, a new voice interrupted.

"It doesn't matter; we'll be taking this from here." They both looked around, and both of them were surprised at what they were seeing.

Tall, red-haired, with his ridiculous cape and suit, the Champion of Kanto and Johto, Lance, stood before them with a stern expression on his face.

"Master Lance," Officer Jenny stood up with alarm. "What—?"

"No time. Professor Samuel Oak's emergency password has been entered into his research database system. He's not one to abuse this power, so whatever is happening is bad. If someone is holding him to gain access to that system, they'll be able to gain access to many more, including the League's, much easier." Lance's eyes shifted to Brock. "I remember you. You were at the Lake of Rage a few years ago."

"The red Gyarados," Brock nodded his head, then frowned. "My friends are back with the guy who took Professor Oak and Doctor Young."

"Doctor Young?" Lance repeated slowly before nodding his head. "All right. Take me and my men there. Now."

Brock nodded his head. He came for Officer Jenny, but he was coming back with something much, much better.

Sky

Behind The Mask

"Mew."

Ash's eyes snapped up above them at the soft sound. Professor Oak shifted a bit to look in the same direction, and there they saw the small form of the Mirage Mew hovering over them. Ash could feel the difference between Mew and what was being formed in front of them, and it only proved how much of a monstrosity this thing was going to be.

"The first creation, a failed specimen, a flaw," Mirage Master spoke up. "Mew was to be my first masterpiece, but it is weak and soft. The data I had did not reflect its power. It was emotional, it didn't listen. It was useless."

Ash reached his hand up, and the Mew floated down to him, pressing the top of its head against his hand with a smile and a purr. "It's not flawed," he mumbled. "It feels more real than anything else here."

"Feels real?" Professor Oak repeated slowly.

Ash nodded, but then wished he hadn't because of how much it hurt. "The Mirage Pokemon, they don't feel right. There's something wrong with them. Mew's different though."

This exchange went unnoticed by Mirage Master, who was too eager about the creation that was starting to form. He spun around, his cloak moving around him impressively as he said, "Observe the strongest Pokemon the world has ever seen." He turned back, his cloak flying open as he spread out his arms. "Behold, Mewtwo!"

Ash already knew what was coming, but as light and energy exploded around them, he had to cover his eyes and cringe at the feeling. It was horrible. Instinctively, he fought back against it, his own aura pushing the twisted energy away from him and Professor Oak. Windows shattered, but none of the glass hit them, bouncing harmlessly off of the invisible shield he had created around them.

The light was almost too bright, the energy too strong. Professor Oak silently urged him to actually get off of the metal table, and with some difficulty, Ash managed to get up and get his footing, stumbling back away from the source of the negative light. His shield faltered and fell, but luckily, the falling glass had stopped.

"Ash!"

"Pikapi!"

"Riori!"

Ash's eyes snapped open again, and he twisted around, his eyes falling on May first, wondering why she was there. Then his Riolu jumped into his line of sight, followed by Pikachu, who grinned and looked behind him.

Ash looked around Professor Oak, and he was certain that he forgot how to breathe as his eyes met worried sea-green ones.

"Are you guys okay?" May called out to them, and while Professor Oak called out to them encouragingly, Ash was frozen.

"Ash?" Misty called out to him, obviously worried. He truly did look like hell with blood and bruises all over him, his entire demeanour being one of defeat. She could feel her heart beating loudly as he stared at her with stunned eyes. Though they were in danger, and it was entirely out of place, Misty just stared at him and took a step forward.

Ash felt like he couldn't breathe, like he was being strangled, and yet he could hear his heart pounding in his ears. Surely she was an illusion of some sort? But he knew her aura, even if he never thought about it before. He knew hers, and all of his friends and his Pokemon, but Misty's was different.

Ash lurched away from Professor Oak and literally threw himself at Misty. She stumbled back as he hugged her tightly, a shuddering breath escaping his lips. May took a startled step back away from them, but then looked a little more than amused as Misty's arms went around Ash, and they both hugged each other.

"I thought you were dead." His voice was shaking, cracking as he spoke. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. There was nothing I could do."

"I know, I know," she muttered, rubbing his back. "I'm alive. I'm here. And you did save me." Still keeping the closeness between them, Misty took out his pokeball and then said, "Snorlax broke my ball before May pulled me up. I would have died if you didn't bring him. You saved me."

Ash stared down at the pokeball and let out a bark of a laugh suddenly. He couldn't remember the last time he felt so relieved that he wanted to break down and cry. She was alive. He was about to say something about Riolu being there too when the Mew that had been silently hovering in the room let out an alarmed cry.

It glided behind the two girls, pale blue eyes wide as it stared at the glowing chamber as the violet light retracted back into it, compressing into a familiar silhouette. Familiar to both Ash and Misty, that was.

"No," Misty breathed out, any thoughts of a heartfelt reunion instantly vanishing.

"He dug through my memories for data on aura, but he found them instead." The guilt was clear on Ash's face, but there was no time to address that as the light faded away, leaving a Pokemon that had the same faint glow to it as all of the other Mirage Pokemon they encountered.

"What is that?" May took a step back, sapphire eyes widening with alarm.

"Riori."

"Pikapi."

Pikachu and Riolu both moved by Ash's legs, and he reached down and took both Pokemon into his arms, feeling the exhaustion from Pikachu and the sheer determination from Riolu. Little thing was a fighter apparently, but he didn't stand a chance.

Misty suddenly gasped and sidestepped as the Mirage Pokemon that surrounded them earlier appeared before them again. None of them moved to attack them though.

"This is no ordinary Mewtwo! Behold its power!" Mirage Master pointed in their general direction, and Mewtwo's violet eyes snapped open. A shadow ball that was visibly stronger than the one hurled at Max earlier on grew in its hands before he threw it not at them, but at the other Mirage Pokemon.

They all cried out in pain before their forms shattered into small dots of light that faded. As much as Ash didn't like their presence, it was still disturbing to see any type of Pokemon in that much pain.

Mew let out a horrified cry, flying out over where the Pokemon had been moments ago and looking around for them, but they were all gone. Professor Oak threw his arm out in front of Ash, pushing him back behind him a few steps. The motion made him dizzy, because he really wasn't okay, but he didn't protest it any as he felt both Misty and May tug him back so he was between them.

Dark laughter echoed off the metallic walls of the room. Mirage Master held his hands in the air like a presenter. "You are looking at perfection! And now, you will experience it too!"

Mewtwo formed another shadow ball, but this time, Professor Oak was not going to let any of them get harmed. He had already failed them enough in that respect today. "Dragonite! Twister!" He threw his pokeball forward, and his powerful Dragonite emerged. Its high pitched roar echoed as it used its wings to form a twister. The current slammed into the shadow ball, and the two attacks exploded midair, smoke filling up the room as Dragonite landed at Oak's side again.

"You think your Pokemon are strong enough to defeat Mewtwo?" Mirage Master's voice pierced through the smoke.

"No," Oak mumbled under her breath as he turned to the children. "Hurry, we need to run now." It was never his intention to defeat Mewtwo; it was his intention to give them cover to run.

They wasted little time hurrying out of the room, and Ash could have sworn he felt a spike of rage coming from Mirage Master. Now wasn't the time to think on that though. They had to run.

They rushed down the stairs and towards the door when Ash stumbled to his knees. It was only the alarmed cry of his two Pokemon that caused the others to notice. Misty let out a gasp of his name and ran back to him, kneeling down beside him. "Come on, you need to get up."

"I feel like I'm going to be sick," he admitted. "Everything hurts." He let go of Pikachu and Riolu, who stood close to him with obvious worried expressions.

Misty looked up at Professor Oak with almost helpless eyes. "Is there anything we can do for him?"

"Some Pokemon have healing abilities that do work on people," Oak noted. "Unfortunately, none of mine do. We'll have to carry him."

"That'll slow you guys down," Ash said. "Keep going; I'll get out. Take Pikachu and Riolu with you."

"Absolutely not," Professor Oak snapped, startling all of them. "Right now, out of all of us, you're the only one with something that Mirage Master might value. If anything, you're the one who has to get out."

"Mew mew."

They all looked up as Mew hovered over them. A frown appeared on its face, and it floated down in front of Ash. He didn't feel anything negative coming from it, so he didn't flinch away as Mew reached out and placed a small paw on Ash's head.

He let out a gasp as he felt a rush of energy surge through him. The pain and foginess from his head started to fade, and the ache from his limbs all but vanished. He looked at Mew with

surprised eyes, and the Mirage Pokemon smiled, quite happy with itself.

Pikachu sniffed him and smiled. "Chaa." He looked at Riolu. "Pikapi cha pi pika pikachu."

"Riolu ri!" The baby Pokemon smiled happily.

"Thank you." Ash managed to push himself up with little trouble. Of course, Mew was a Mirage Pokemon, so it would have been stronger, and it would have known every and all moves, so a powerful healing one was definitely in the mix.

Misty touched his arm where there had been a cut that was completely healed over, staring at it in awe. Mew flew over to her next and touched her hand that was heavily bruised from both Machoke and her fall. It stung for a moment, but as the skin cleared, it felt good as new. "You didn't have to." She glanced over at Ash, as he lifted up her arm to inspect it himself. He balanced Riolu in his other arm as Pikachu climbed up onto his shoulder. She rolled her eyes slightly, but with a genuine smile on her face.

"Mew mew mew, mew mew mew." It pointed towards the stairs and then started to fly down, motioning for them to follow. Between the time Ash had first fallen, and now, only a couple minutes had passed, but those were minutes that they really needed to make up.

"Come on," Professor Oak encouraged, deciding that Mew wouldn't have healed Ash and Misty just to drag them back into another trap.

The four of them ran, following Mew with Dragonite trailing behind them. The dragon Pokemon could easily overtake them with its speed, but he was making sure nothing came behind them. The very familiar gateway came into view, and every one of them expected to be stopped before they could get over the threshold. They managed to make it though, relief rushing through all of them like they had just escaped some sort of horrible horror movie.

Ash thought back to what they saw in the loading dock and held Riolu close to him, taking a second glance at Pikachu. It really could have been a horror movie. They could have been slaughtered, and Misty, he thought she had died. He looked over at her again, taking a deep breath. She was alive, and that was what mattered.

He couldn't shake off the horrible feeling that they weren't out of the woods yet though. Well, he wasn't going to try to shake off the feeling. The last time he did that turned into a disaster.

"May!"

The brunette twisted around, an annoyed groan escaping her lips as she rushed forward, meeting her younger brother half way. "Max, you were supposed to stay hidden!"

"But I saw the windows explode up there." His worry was palpable, and he actually allowed himself to hug his sister tightly. May let out a huff and hugged him back for a moment, watching him carefully as he stepped around her once he caught sight of Professor Oak. Whatever question he might have had died on his lips though. "Mew?"

"It's a Mirage Pokemon," May explained to her brother. "But he really helped out Ash and Misty." Her sapphire eyes flickered around the area. "Did you hear anything from Brock yet?"

"Do you see him anywhere around here?" Max asked sarcastically.

May was about to snap back at him when the loud, groaning sound of scraping metal echoed through the air. They all covered their ears, though that did little help to stop it all. That horrible

sound was the only warning they got before missiles were launched from all of the towers.

"What's going on?" Ash asked, not that he expected anyone to have an answer. None of them could move before one of them hit the ground not far from them, but they didn't explode or cause any damage; they just stuck in the ground. They all just stared at them for a moment before the tops peeled open like metallic flowers, the gemstones inside lighting up brightly.

Instantly, Ash was on edge again and a shudder from Riolu, as well as a high-pitched 'chaa' from Pikachu let him know that they felt the same. Riolu, he could understand, but Pikachu's reaction threw him off a little bit. That didn't make sense, unless when his own aura was connecting to Riolu's earlier, that pull her felt from Pikachu was connecting them in the same way. There was no time to think on that though, because he knew exactly what was coming.

"Professor," May spoke up, her voice squeaking slightly. "What do we do?"

The old man's eyes looked around him, and opened his mouth to speak but Ash interrupted him. There was a fire in his eyes as he said, "We do what we came here to do and fight this system!"

"You're brave boy, I will give you that." Mirage Master's voice echoed from the gate of the laboratory as he walked towards them, Mewtwo gliding along eerily at his side. "But so very stupid to have such a gift wasted on you. I will spread my Mirage System across the world, and then everyone will bow down to me."

Ash watched carefully as the masked man revealed a controller identical to the one Doctor Young had used earlier, focusing on his hand. A bit of a smirk appeared on his face when he saw what he expected to see there, something that gave everything away.

He didn't get the chance to say or do anything though. The vibrant orange lights of the Mirage System lit up again, forming new creatures that made his skin crawl. Entei, Articuno, and Zapdos all glared at them viciously, and even Ash knew that their Pokemon didn't actually stand a chance against them. The Legendaries themselves were powerful, but if he could alter them to do anything he wanted them to do, that was an entirely different story.

"Finally! All my many years of hard work are coming to fruition! I will create an army of Legendary Pokemon!"

"Who is this maniac?" May muttered as she held Max close to her.

"Doctor Young."

May, Max, and Misty all looked at Ash with confusion, but Professor Oak actually seemed quite proud that he had caught on too. Even Mirage Master seemed completely taken back that he actually knew this.

"How hard did you hit your head?" Misty demanded.

"Yeah Ash. We saw the Aerodactyl carrying Doctor Young off."

"We did, but what we didn't do is physically interact with Mirage Master. It wouldn't be hard to create an illusion in a place like this. It's what it's built for, after all. Holograms and illusions of reality," Professor Oak explained, his harsh blue eyes never once looking away from the masked man. "The more I was around him, the more I realized that it was him."

"His hand is hurt," Ash said. "Where the remote blew up." He held Riolu and Pikachu closer to him. "Plus he's the same. I can feel it."

"You can feel it?" The masked man laughed hysterically as he reached up, tossing his hat aside before removing the metal mask and it hit the ground with a thud. Suddenly, Doctor Young's periwinkle eyes seemed much more malicious than they had earlier. "You know, I think I'll keep you here. There's still much I could learn from you."

Misty actually growled, taking a step forward and holding onto Ash's arm while glaring at Doctor Young, as if daring him to make a move towards the raven-haired boy. The Mirage Pokemon might have been powerful, but Misty was pretty sure she could take him out any day of the week.

"I am curious about how you knew though, Oak."

Professor Oak shook his head. "It was easy to figure out. When Mew appeared for the first time in the lab, you called it a flawed specimen. You knew the system inside and out, and no one who could have just stumbled upon this place would have had that power over it!"

"The Pokemon!" Ash yelled suddenly, brown eyes narrowing with anger as he jerked out of Misty's grasp. "In the crates! You experimented on all of them to figure out more about them! You murdered hundreds of them." A thought occurred to Ash as he said that. If Doctor Young had experimented on Pokemon, testing things on their physical bodies to get the Mirage System right, then how could he perfectly make Legendaries from a memory? Sure, he said the memory was turned into data, but Ash was pretty sure he didn't know everything about them.

Meaning his memories weren't complete, which meant that the Mirage Pokemon couldn't be complete either! Not really! He was honestly a bit surprised with himself for piecing this all together.

"I see you found my disposal site. They were a sacrifice in the name of progress."

"You're sick!" Misty cried out. "Pokemon are not experiments!"

"I don't understand," Max mumbled behind them. "Why is everyone just yelling at each other and not doing anything?"

"I think..." May trailed off thoughtfully. Though Professor Oak, Ash, and Misty hadn't said a word about it, it was like all three of them had formed a unit working towards the same goal, one that she was cluing in on too. "I think they're distracting him."

"I should have known you'd do something like this," Professor Oak snapped angrily as the Maple siblings whispered behind them. "After what you did years ago with your experiments and the League took your researcher's license away until your probation was over! Your methods were too reckless! Too dangerous to Pokemon!"

"Those who refuse to do challenge what's right and what's wrong are weak failures. And that's why the League will be the first to fall! You were all blind!" A maniacal grin appeared on his face. "But you won't be blind anymore." He hit a few buttons on his remote, and the three Legendary Pokemon rushed forward.

"Pika!" Pikachu jumped from Ash's arms, glaring harshly at the Entei that rushed towards them.

"Wait!" Ash called out suddenly. "Go for Articuno instead! It's part flying-type! Hit it with Thundershock!" He held onto Riolu tighter, as the baby tried to jump out of his arms. "No, I don't think so."

"Let's go, Gyarados! Take out Entei!"

"You too, Combusken! Try to hit Zapdos!"

With some quick thinking, Pikachu jumped over Entei, using his head to launch himself at Articuno, electricity sparking around him and shooting at the legendary. Articuno flew in a circle to avoid the attack while charging an Ice Beam that Pikachu couldn't dodge. The little electric Pokemon let out a cry of pain as it was thrown back to the ground harshly.

"Pikachu!" Ash cried out in horror and tried to run to his partner, but Professor Oak stopped him from throwing himself into the fray.

At the same time Pikachu was fighting Articuno, Gyarados and Combusken made their own moves.

"Fire Spin!"

"Hydro Pump!"

Fire and water shot through the air towards Entei and Zapdos, but both proved to be much too quick. Zapdos flew through the fire, and much to their shock, turned its attention to Gyarados. It unleashed a powerful Thunder attack, rendering Misty's strongest Pokemon useless almost instantly. As this was happening, Entei jumped over the water and slammed its body into Combusken's. The smaller Pokemon let out a cry of pain as it was thrown backwards and skidded on the ground.

"Gyarados!" Misty rushed to her Pokemon's side, hugging the crest on its head best as she could as it twitched in pain. As powerful as Gyarados was, he was a water and flying-type, meaning he had four times the weakness to electric attacks, let alone one from a juiced-up Zapdos.

May knelt on the ground beside Combusken, cradling her very first Pokemon with unshed tears of pain and frustration. Max hurried to her side, staring down at him with worried eyes.

"Dragonite! Use Hyper Beam!"

"No!" Ash cried out, but it was too late. Dragonite's powerful attack streaked towards Mewtwo, and the one thing Ash feared would happen, did. Mewtwo simply held out his hand, and the attack crashed into an invisible barrier. He wondered, for just a moment, why Professor Oak seemed so shocked before it occurred to him that very few people even knew Mewtwo existed, let alone encountered one.

Mewtwo shot through the Hyper Beam and just punched Dragonite in the face, slamming it into the ground where the dragon-type became just as helpless as the rest of theirs

Ash took the distraction to rush forward and grab Pikachu, who was twitching in pain, frost sticking to his once soft fur. As Ash hurried back to where his friends were, he couldn't help but notice that Doctor Young really did seem to know a thing or two about Mewtwo.

His dark brown eyes glanced at the lifelike-feeling Mew, and he wondered briefly why it hadn't done anything. The Mirage Mew looked like it was contemplating something, but it was also waiting.

"What is that thing?" Max asked, eyes flashing up to Ash.

"I've never seen something so powerful," May added, trying to keep the fear from creeping into her voice.

"It's very unfortunate that I can't let you leave here," Doctor Young spoke up. "The others that I brought here, none of them left, but you came so very close."

"Others..." Professor Oak whispered. "What have you done?"

"Pokemon aren't the only expendable things that come into my laboratory."

Ash felt like he was going to be sick again. The image of those dead Pokemon rushed in front of his eyes, and he couldn't believe that someone would do that on people too. They truly had stumbled onto a horror movie, and the sadistic, mass murderer just revealed himself.

"But be honoured, for you got to experience the power that Pokemon were meant to have. You get to see a glimpse of the future!"

The sickness twisted into anger, and Ash looked around at Max, passing him Pikachu and setting Riolu on the ground. "Keep them here."

Without any thought to what he was doing, or what he was going to do, Ash ran out in front of everyone else and yelled at the madman. "You're wrong! You don't know the first thing about any Pokemon, let alone these Legendary ones!"

Back at the Tree of Beginning, Ash's aura had been more dynamic, more out of control since it was just newly released, and all of the natural aura flowing around there made it react in stronger ways. Now though, there were no rocks, but he could feel it pulsing through him angrily. After everything Doctor Young had done, after thinking that Misty was dead, he couldn't take it anymore. A pale blue light started forming in his hand, and Doctor Young's eyes went wide for just a moment.

"Mewtwo! Get rid of him!"

The Mirage Mewtwo shot forward and was about to hit Ash before the boy could even think about doing anything to stop it, but he didn't need to, not at that moment. Mew proved to be faster than any of them believed, flying in between the two of them and forming a shield that stopped Mewtwo's attack.

"Mew?" Ash muttered, a bit surprised, but the Pokemon ignored him. Pale pink eyes were narrowed as pink surrounded it before a psychic attack was launched at Mewtwo. Mewtwo retaliated with pale blue light, and the collision forced both of them and Ash backwards. The aura sphere that he had been creating fizzled out, but the power was still rushing through him almost painfully.

That wasn't really what attracted his attention though. Both Mew and Mewtwo were charging up their attacks again, and Ash was taken back through time and space to a still slightly faint memory from a few years ago. The scene was so familiar that it sent shivers up his spine.

"Ri rio!" He jumped with surprise as the baby Pokemon darted out by him, running between the two pokemon and holding up his hands like he wanted them to stop.

Horror rushed through him as he sprinted forward without another thought. "Riolu!" Pink and blue light shot at each other just as Ash threw himself over the baby Pokemon in hopes to shield him with his own body. The power that was rushing through him earlier lashed out around him, colliding with both of the attacks.

Ash could feel the heat and the power swirling around him, but this time, Mew and Mewtwo didn't hit him. Slowly, his eyes opened, a visible, pale blue shield pulsing around him. He was breathing

heavily, and Ash was sure that he heard Professor Oak, Misty, May, and Max yelling at him, but he didn't move. Instead, he cradled the shaking Riolu in his arms and glared at Doctor Young.

Ash had dealt with a lot of horrible people in his life. From the constant annoyance of Jesse and James, to the bullying of Gary Oak (okay maybe he shouldn't have been grouped with horrible people, but it's not like anyone else needed to know Ash's thoughts), to people who tried to kill Legendaries, disrespected Pokemon, destroyed things without a second thought, and so much more. The Collector, Team Magma, Team Aqua, and so many more were people that he'd encountered before, but none of them infuriated him quite like Doctor Young did.

There must have been something in his eyes, a look that didn't quite fit, because Doctor Young suddenly blinked with surprise before he said, "I think it's time for another lesson." He hit a few buttons on the remote, and then the screams started.

Mew cried out in agony as it started to deteriorate, breaking back down into data. Shriill shrieks from Articuno and Zapdos echoed around them, and Entei's pained roar was loud enough to make anyone shudder.

Instead of going into the Mirage System like Aggron did earlier though, all of the data started flowing into Mewtwo.

"There isn't a Pokemon on this planet that could defeat Mewtwo! And now, nothing will ever be able to!" Doctor Young held out his hand. "Finish them off, Mewtwo!"

In a horrid display, the faces of all of the Pokemon and some others that they encountered that day started growing out of Mewtwo as he was enveloped in a dark, pulsing smoke.

Riolu whimpered in Ash's arms, and he knew why. Everything about this creature was twisted and wrong, and Ash actually flinched as Mewtwo fired attacks from every face on its body.

"Pikapi!" It wasn't just Pikachu, Gyarados, Combusken, and Dragonite that attacked. Ash hadn't noticed all of his Pokemon leaving their pokeballs, but they were attacking along with all of Misty and May's Pokemon.

The attacks collided midair, but Mewtwo proved to be far too strong, throwing the entire group back onto the ground.

All of them were in so much pain, shaking and shivering, that Ash could feel tears welling up in his eyes. He had to do something, he just had to.

"Riolu, run back to them, please," he told the baby Pokemon, who seemed hesitant, but nodded his head. The barrier around them fell, and the little Pokemon ran back as Ash stood up, facing the twisted, demented form of Mirage Mewtwo.

"This is wrong!" Ash yelled at him. "That's not a Pokemon! Not anymore!"

"Mewtwo, show this boy how much of a Pokemon you really are!"

The same psychic attack from earlier launched at Ash, but he held up his hands and willingly conjured a shield. He skidded back a few steps, but it held despite the sheer power coming from it. Ash knew that he had to do something though, because he wasn't strong enough to keep this up forever. He concentrated on Mewtwo, trying to feel him out to see if there was some weakness somewhere. How Ash knew how to do this was beyond even him, but he was going to trust his instincts.

That's when he felt it. It was small, but it was there.

"Mew," he whispered, and using the attack almost like a connection, a bridge to this twisted illusion of Mewtwo, Ash's aura reached out and touched the small, surviving piece of Mew that he could feel.

Mewtwo's attack stopped, and it grabbed its chest, gasping and shaking. A moment later, a vicious orange glow appeared around Mewtwo as Mew appeared above it, a look of pure concentration on its face.

"Mew's holding it in place!" Professor Oak's voice broke through Ash's slightly confused mind as his barrier fell away. "Its data must have survived within Mewtwo! We need to do something now!"

Ash's eyes darted around, landing on the machines that were powering the Mirage System. Almost like a series of flashbacks were rushing through his mind, small moments that he all but ignored before hit him again and again. He rushed forward, an aura sphere appearing in his hand as he slammed it down into one of the gemstones.

Pain rushed through Ash as the machine blew up under his hand. He fell to the ground, gasping in pain as he held his burned, bleeding hand, barely able to open up his eyes to watch the results of his actions. He was glad he did though. The whole system was connected together with energy, and the chain reaction was spectacular. Machine after machine blew up, and a bit of satisfaction rushed through him when he saw the remote blow up in Doctor Young's good hand. The chain reaction didn't just end there though. It streaked through the laboratory, destroying every piece of machinery that was created in order to work the Mirage System.

Light surrounded Mewtwo as it vanished in an agonized shower of data. The same couldn't be said for Mew though. It smiled at everyone broadly, and Ash could feel that bit of realness that he had always felt in the Pokemon reaching out to him. It was happy; it was thankful. It was okay with disappearing. The tiny Pokemon vanished peacefully without a single regret.

Fire and smoke filled the air, and Ash slowly looked up when he felt someone kneel beside him. Despite the fact that he was exhausted, and he was in pain, Ash smiled at Misty, his smile growing as Pikachu and Riolu both jumped onto his lap. She didn't say a word to him; she didn't need to. At that moment, he was still so in-tuned with his aura that he could feel her worry and her relief.

"Young," Professor Oak said as he approached the man, who just stood there staring at them, "you need to answer for all your crimes. You're coming with me."

A dark smile passed over Doctor Young's face. "I think I'll pass. There is much work left to be done." He turned with a flourish of his cape when a shadow passed over them all and a massive figure landed between the burning lab and Doctor Young.

"No, I don't think you will." Standing atop his larger than average Dragonite, Lance stared down at the madman sternly. "I might have missed the party, but you're not going to repeat it."

Ash recognized the duel-champion, and relief rushed through him. He moved onto his knees, holding Riolu and Pikachu in one arm as he used the other one to pull Misty into a sort-of hug.

They were all alive, and it was over.

Sky

Make A Promise

"So, you're sure Mew was the one that caused the system to blow up?"

Professor Oak had known many young trainers that went on to do amazing things with their lives, and though he was from Blackthorn City in Johto and not Pallet Town, he was still very familiar with Champion Lance. Though he seemed to be a bit of a joker and easy going, Oak knew that Lance took his job very seriously, and he was very good at sniffing out liars.

"Yes, that's exactly what happened," he said evenly, having been asked the same question in several different ways so far. He wasn't the only one. Once Brock brought help and Doctor Young was in custody, they were all questioned over and over again about the events that happened. The evidence that was left behind in the remains of the laboratory were enough to prosecute Doctor Young for the rest of his life, with so many dead Pokemon and the gruesome discovery of dead Pokemon trainers, some of them rather well known. Still, the League wanted the story of what happened too, and they wanted it before anyone could discuss it and agree to change their stories to hide things.

They were almost successful, since Professor Oak was very stern about no one mentioning Ash's aura. Not even the slightest mention of it.

Lance sighed. "I apologize for repeating questions. We just had to be thorough. You can go now, Professor, but we may contact you for more information." He frowned a bit. "How are the kids doing?" He had spoken to each of them in length earlier, but that had been hours ago.

"Ash's hand is going to need a bit of healing, but it's the mental scars that will be the worst part." Oak sighed. "The world has changed so much since I first set out on my own journey a long time ago. Not all of it for the better. People stole and hunted down Pokemon back then, but this is something else entirely."

"When I was young, we had a new and budding Team Rocket to worry about," Lance agreed, "but they were nothing like they are now. They're more organized, more creative, more violent." Shaking his hand, the red-headed man waved towards the door. "I apologize for taking up so much of your time. You must be tired."

"Yes, I think I'll go and get a bit of rest before returning home tomorrow. If the children didn't say it, thank you for providing transportation to Cerulean City." With a rather dismissive nod from the Champion of Johto and Kanto, Professor Oak left the room.

They had temporarily made their base in the Cerulean City Gym at Professor Oak's urging. The kids were all exhausted and they needed to be somewhere they were comfortable and familiar with.

Professor Oak stopped outside of the doors to the Waterflower's living room, watching all five of them sit together. Brock was fawning over some pictures of the three eldest Waterflowers, May and Max were both asleep at opposite ends of the couch, while Ash and Misty were sitting on the floor, talking quietly to one another as Pikachu, Riolu, and Azurill slept quietly on the floor in front of them.

The man watched Ash silently. He had always known that young boy had promise in him but often wondered if his own brashness would end up getting the best of him. It was obvious to him that Ash was growing up, that he had always been special, but never in his wildest dreams did Professor Oak every expect one of his protégées to have one of the rarest powers on earth, nor did he expect

him to meet the rarest Pokemon on earth too.

Yes, Ash Ketchum was definitely special, and Professor Oak was going to keep a keen eye out for whatever he did in the future. For now though, he wouldn't spy on them. He had to get on the phone and assure Delia that everything was all right again.

...

It was mind-boggling to believe that everything that happened had spanned less than twenty-four hours. It seemed like the horrors of Doctor Young's laboratory had taunted them for days or even weeks. Maybe it was because the memories were haunting them, sticking in their minds clearly every night during the following week.

Well, maybe not all of them, for that, Ash was thankful. May had seen a bit, but Max and Brock were almost entirely spared the painful experience. Misty, she had been the one to go through everything with him, and for that, Ash was both thankful and sorry.

They were all sleeping in the living room as they had done the entire week since returning back to Cerulean City. None of them wanted to be separated from one another—Misty and May in her room while Ash, Brock, and Max would have shared the guest room. Instead, May and Max shared the couch, sleeping at opposite ends, while the elder three had their sleeping bags on the floor.

A week to physically heal, a week to mentally heal. At least enough to keep going. A week wasn't nearly long enough, but for this type of thing, there wasn't a set amount of time that it could take. Sometimes, all that could be done was to jump right back in feet first.

Nightmares plagued Ash, just small, brief glimpses of mutilated Pokemon and people (even though he hadn't seen any people himself down in Doctor Young's 'disposal' site). Much more common were the nightmares of what Doctor Young would have done if he wouldn't have destroyed the Mirage System, and even more commonly than that, he saw Misty fall again and again.

He rolled over in his blue sleeping bag, not the least bit surprised to see Misty staring at him. She had lived through almost the exact same thing as him, so she understood.

"You need to get some sleep; you're leaving in the morning."

A bittersweet feeling hit Ash, because they were leaving that morning, and by they, he meant Brock, May, Max, and himself. Misty would remain at her gym while they traveled onward.

"I wish you were coming," he admitted.

"I know. But you know why I'm not."

"Yeah," he agreed with a slight nod, keeping his voice low. "And it's okay. I just...still wish you were." It was selfish thought, because he only wanted the best for all of his friends, and staying here was the best thing for Misty's own goals at the moment. He knew that, and that's why he wasn't truly whining about it or anything.

"That's okay. I kinda wish you were staying," Misty reached out of her sleeping bag, and he met her half way, holding her hand tightly. "But we'll still talk all the time. We always did before, and it'd be rude to talk to your girlfriend even less than before."

Girlfriend. That was still an incredibly weird thought. They hadn't discussed that, but when she first dropped the words girlfriend and boyfriend, he hadn't protested at all. Ash was fine with it; actually he was pretty sure that he liked the idea of it. They were still very young though, and there would

be time for more in depth conversations in the future. Right now, neither of them could think of anything to say, so they settled for a silent understanding that they both agreed on.

Ash smiled at her and nodded his head, shifting Pikachu and Riolu close to him. Though Ash did get a pokeball for the smaller than average Pokemon, she really preferred being out, just like her favourite Pikachu that she adopted as an older brother.

"Your Riolu is perfectly fine, despite being a little bit smaller," Nurse Joy assured him, petting his tiny Pokemon on the head after checking up on it. "She's a little trooper."

"Yeah I – wait – she?" Ash spluttered out. "I thought that...you're sure it's a she?" The Lucario they met before had been a he, so he just assumed that this Riolu would be the same.

"Yes, I'm very positive." Nurse Joy giggled at his reaction. "Your Riolu is definitely female."

That had some as a bit of a shock, but Ash quickly accepted it. It was just like having a little daughter around really, except a less needy, Pokemon one. It didn't change anything though. Nothing really changed anything.

"Get some sleep," Misty whispered to Ash. "I'll see you in the morning."

"See you in the morning," Ash repeated with a yawn, his eyes fluttering shut as he finally fell asleep, holding Misty's hand the whole time.

...

"You lost your hat." Ash glanced over at Misty as he made sure that his backpack was on right. Behind Ash, Pikachu and Riolu were watching Brock, May, and Max double-check that they had all of their supplies before they got on the road, away from most big cities.

She smiled at him warmly as she took her hands behind her back, placing a cap on top of his head. Not just any cap though, the one that he left at home before going to Hoenn, his first one. He peered up at her encouraging face curiously. Ash had sent that to her not long after he got his newer one, figuring that she gave him her handkerchief so he should probably give her something too (it never really occurred to him at the time). His head felt bare without one since he lost it back at Doctor Young's laboratory, and it really meant a lot to know that she kept the hat this long. Really though, losing his newer hat was more than a fair trade for having Misty, all his friends, come out of that safely.

Her smile vanished as she stared at Ash, who in turn was staring down at the ground, the beak of his cap hiding his face in shadows.

Little Azurill, who was standing by Misty's feet let out a small squeak of worry at his sad expression.

Ash suddenly let out a sigh and looked up at Misty, a genuine smile on his face. "I wish you were coming, but I understand why you're not. I want you to chase what you want, not just tag along with me. That wouldn't be fair. And someday, if you travel again and it brings you to where I am, no matter what happens you're always welcome. And if it takes you with other people and not me, well, that's okay too. You do what you need to do and I'll support you like you always do with me. I just...let's make a promise, okay? That...we'll never forget it all. That we'll be best friends no matter what happens."

"Ash..." Misty closed her eyes for a second before smiling at him. "You don't have to ask that. We've only scratched the surface of our story. Even if we're far apart, traveling with different

people, or we're alone, we'll keep moving forward together."

He stared at her with a bit of confusion before he smiled and said, "Mist...we'll never be alone." He paused and then added, "Team Rocket will always be close by."

Her cheeks flushed at first at his words, but then she let out a groan and cuffed his head. "Way to ruin the moment, dork." Still, Misty let out a laugh because she knew it was true. She reached her hand out and said, "All right, serious for a minute. This isn't goodbye. It never is. We'll keep working as hard as we can to reach our dreams separately until we're together again."

Ash looked at her hand for a moment before reaching out and taking it into his own, squeezing it briefly and then tugging her forward. Misty let out a startled sound that wasn't quite a yelp as he let go of her, wrapping his arms around her instead. Her cheeks turned pink again, but she wrapped her arms around him, returning the tight hug. She was more than just a bit taken back, because Brock, May, and Max could clearly see what they were doing, and Ash was the one who had been more embarrassed about all this than her. He honestly didn't seem to care though.

They just stood, silently hugging each other with their heads resting on the other's shoulder, one of the many benefits of finally being the same height. Misty looked up and saw Brock staring at them with an amused smirk and glared at him. He chuckled a little bit and shook his head, glancing back at the arguing May and Max. His smile shifted into one that was sadder than amused as he looked back at her and tapped his bare wrist. Misty understood the silent gesture. It was getting late, and they had to get going or they'd never end up leaving.

Misty let out a huff of a sigh and pulled back slightly, glancing sideways at Ash as he asked, "Time to go?"

"Yeah." She was silent for a moment as he pulled back, but then she muttered something quietly so only he could hear. Ash seemed to contemplate that for a moment before smiling and nodding his head.

He took a step away from her, but then that same look came back to his face, the one that, though it was mean, made it seem like he was almost in pain from thinking so hard. Ash shook his head slightly. Things always worked out better when he went with his gut instincts over any incredibly deep thoughts. He took a step towards her, startling her as he gave her a brief peck on the lips that she didn't even get the chance to respond to, before he rushed off to where his traveling companions were waiting for him.

"Hey!" Misty yelled at him with narrowed eyes.

Ash just laughed as he spun back around to face her once he reached May and Max. Pikachu jumped up onto his shoulder, and Riolu looked up at them curious before Pikachu pointed at Ash's other shoulder.

"Pipi pika chu pikapi." Riolu let out a squeak of a laugh at that and with a great leap, managing to jump onto Ash's arm, climbed the rest of the way onto his other shoulder where she made herself comfortable. Pikachu reached around to pat her head, smiling broadly.

Ash chuckled at his Pokemon then focused on the redhead. "You'll have to get me back for that later!"

Nobody else seemed to understand, having missed what he had just done, but Misty snorted with amusement. "And I will! Now get going before you're stuck here and I charge you all rent!"

"Bye Misty!" Max called out to her as he started to walk backwards.

"I'll miss having another girl around!" May whined before laughing and waving at her as she grabbed her brother by the shoulders and spun him around so he was facing the right way. There was no need for him to trip.

"I'll keep them out of trouble!" Brock assured her.

"And I'll keep him out of trouble!"

"Max!"

Much like Max had been moments ago, Ash was walking backwards, but without the fear of tripping over anything. It was a lot easier to sense things when he actually accepted the changes in him, instead of resisting or fighting against them.

It was really hard to believe that only a few weeks had passed by since they first met up with Misty at Cameron Castle. It felt like years, but maybe that was because he felt like he was years older. As he watched Misty pick up Azurill and wave back at them, he was glad for it all. The idea of growing up was terrifying, but maybe it really was time to embrace that.

"Pikapi?"

"Riori?"

Ash snapped out of his thoughts at the prompting of his two Pokemon and called out, "Catch ya later, Mist!"

She smiled broadly at him, because in that moment, she could clearly see how much he had really grown up. His choice of words was on purpose, of that, she was sure. He wasn't saying goodbye, because there was no need for that. In that moment, Misty could see the type of person, the type of trainer he would be as he continued to explore the world, meet new friends, and grow. In that moment, she knew it would be okay that she wasn't with him, because it wasn't goodbye and they both knew that.

"Call me when you reach the next town!"

"You got it!"

Misty stopped waving, picking up Azurill and holding the Pokemon close. She stood at the gateway of Cerulean City that most trainers trekked through, watching her friends walk away until she couldn't see them anymore. Though a bittersweet feeling was coursing through her, Misty didn't feel sad. There were no tears—there was no need for them, but Misty still closed her eyes and took a deep breath as the breeze ruffled her orange bangs.

"Zu?"

She opened her eyes and smiled as she turned and started walking back towards the Cerulean Gym. It had been an eventful few weeks, and now it was time to get some normalcy back into her life until the next adventure.

...

"You okay?" May asked Ash as she fell back in step with him, Brock and Max walking a few paces in front of them, though it was obvious that they were both listening.

"Yeah," he answered, and for the first time in weeks, he was completely honest about that. A light breeze rushed by them, and he closed his eyes for just a moment. In the darkness behind his eyes, it wasn't truly dark to him anymore. He could feel and even see so much life around him now. A grin appeared on Ash's face as he suddenly opened his eyes and started running ahead of everyone else. "Come on! We need to get to the next Frontier Brain!"

"Ash, wait!" Brock, May, and Max started running behind him as Pikachu and Riolu held onto his shoulders, both laughing happily along with him.

It had been an eventful few weeks, and Ash knew that he'd never be able to find real normalcy in his life again, but that was okay with him, because that just meant that every day was a new adventure. Roads would split apart, and chapters would close on his adventures, but that was okay, because it just meant that a new one was unfolding. He always hated saying goodbye, but now Ash knew that it would be okay, that even if they weren't with him, his friends would still be there. So even as he defeated the Battle Frontier, and even as he said goodbye to Brock (though only briefly), May, Max, and this part of his story, he wasn't scared. There was still so much more to come.

Misty let out a huff of a sigh and pulled back slightly, glancing sideways at him as he asked, "Time to go?"

"Yeah." She was silent for a moment as he pulled back, but then she muttered, "This feels like the end, but it's only the beginning."

Ash seemed to contemplate that for a moment before smiling and nodding his head.

*Together we'll make a promise
To never forget it all
We've only scratched the surface
Of worlds we'll come to know
Together moving forward
Even though we're far apart
So safe and sound inside our hearts
We keep our word until we are together once again*

-The End-

Sky



Epilogue

Days passed by slowly, leaving him with little to do in his small, high-security cell aside from read the books that he was provided and eat the food that they gave him. Though he didn't let anyone see any outward reactions of discomfort, Doctor Young almost wished that he had made it back into his once magnificent laboratory, even if it would have meant dying in fire and brimstone.

Any small changes in the prison caught his attention, but with red lights flashing and alarms blaring, this was far from a small change. The second the chaos started, guards began to run and shout about something that he couldn't pick up. It was impossible to hear what was going on in any other part of the prison than where he was, so all he could do was wait until one of the guards returns.

Except, they didn't return. Instead, the door to the hall exploded inward from the force of a powerful Rhyperior. People rushed in, all wearing black uniforms with a bright red R adorning them. They stood in front of the cell doors, backs straight and respectful as a tall man dressed in a suit made his way by the cells.

Doctor Young looked up with interest as the man, tall and broad with his freshly-pressed suit and a Persian purring at his legs. His periwinkle eyes went wide, and he said, "Giovanni."

"Your experiments proved to be a success, did they not?" Giovanni asked him simply.

"Yes. There were some kinks, but I can work them out. That information on the Pokemon, Mewtwo, was incomplete, and I was unable to properly utilize him. I can fix that though."

"Excellent." Giovanni nodded at his Rhyperior to rip the bars off of the cell. "Come along. We have much work to do."

-The End-

Sky

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